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Billy's Holiday

IN the eyes of Billy's
teenage daughter; he's a
Loser; and his girlfriend
can't seem to find
the **KEY** to his heart.

But when Billy finds
he can **SING** like his
idol, the *legendary*
BILLIE HOLIDAY
life changes . . .

DENIS WHITBURN



A former advertising copywriter and journalist, Denis Whitburn is a playwright (*The Siege Of Frank Sinatra*), television mini-series writer (*The Last Bastion*, which he also co-produced, *Body-surfer*), screenwriter and producer (*Blood Oath*, *Billy's Holiday*). He lives in Sydney with his wife and daughter.

Silly's Holiday

DENIS WHITBURN



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For my father

CHAPTER

1

'Billy—*be somebody!*'

Reg Conroy, one of the very public faces of the Mighty Man Hardware chain—'What McDonald's is to hamburgers, Mighty Man is to hammer and nails!'—was some piece of work. As smooth as they come. On his top days you could spread what came to him too naturally—for the liking of anyone not on his wavelength—on your morning crumpets and not need another thing to get your day off to a gang-buster's start.

Today was not one of his top days. He never liked coming across to King Street, Newtown. Reg was an Eastern Suburbs kind of guy. Trouble was, as Mighty Man expanded its universe over Sydney, the West was where the honeypot lay. His slight downer also had much to do with taking yet another stab at converting the seemingly inconvertible to The Gospel according to St Mighty Man.

William Constable Appleby, a.k.a. Billy

Apples to anyone on Billy's side—and that was most people in Newtown—had the demeanour of a shaggy leprechaun who had misplaced his whimsy. He turned from the battery display card he was stocking behind the counter in his Dickensian-cluttered hardware shop, peeked out from under a stray tuft of hair and fixed Reg with a look that could peel rust. The dag treated the store as if it was already his domain, picking up items from the shelves and replacing them immediately, without looking at them, and it irritated Billy no end.

'You're saying . . . I'm nob . . . ?'

'Not that you're *nobody*,' Reg made an athletic leap like the verbal champ he was, covering his tracks with the form of a front runner in the Sydney-to-Surf. 'When you're a Mighty Man, well, matey, you're a cut above the rest!'

Reg picked up a packet of wall filler and winced as the dust from it fell onto his suit. He replaced the packet and brushed off the fine layer of dust, his expression, as he turned away from Billy, was one of: *Is this any way to run a business?*

Billy popped another Throatie. His ninth or tenth for the day? Or was it the twelfth? He had lost count. Bloody pollution. Even though he wore this special place of faded and chipped Victorian facades—prissied up by a new wave of sexually questionable trendies—like a pair of favourite shoes from which *nobody* was going to part him, the build-up of traffic along this major

thoroughfare into the city was definitely hazardous to his well-being.

A whole, complex universe existed outside. Along King Street, massed with commerce, there was an ethnic and social mix of 'Newtownites'. Europeans, Asians, indigenous Australians and just plain, ordinary Irish and Scots and Welsh and Cornish and the 'You-name-it-we've got its' from 'back home', of all ages. Stories lived and living in every face.

And everywhere you looked, The Word, *sold* or *told*. Shopfronts. Billboards. Bus stop seats. Backs of taxicabs. On shopping bags. It was all a hurly-burly of vibrant, multicultural, visual and aural . . . well, Billy supposed, of his life's blood. One that now—if the newspapers and the telly current affairs bods were to be believed—was closing in on him, and getting a bit too close for comfort. He was clearly the latest victim of Twentieth Centuryitis.

He had woken up this morning with an irritating tickle on his tonsils and (this being Thursday) the last thing Billy needed was his throat packing in on him.

He had the feeling it was going to be a Bunny Berigan kind of day, with a soulful trumpet wail of 'I Can't Get Started' floating through his head. Billy was prepared to face a Bunny Berigan day—where the ordinary, the everyday things he, and the rest of Newtown (hey, the city—the whole country! Why stop at that? The whole world!), took for granted was

imbued with their own ... crazy, lazy sense of jazzy rhythm.

Bunny Berigan days were at the top of Billy's list of all-time favourite days.

Sadly, it wasn't to be.

Bunny's big band magic, reaching out to him from way back before World War II, was quickly replaced by the tadpole lodged in his throat, causing him no end of annoyance through his shower and the bowl of Weeties he had to put aside when he realised he was only adding insult to whatever injury was occurring within the region of his Adam's apple.

Now, doing his best to ignore the numbness stretching from his teeth back down the shute, Billy went on doing what he was doing because there was no one else to do the job for him. He would have liked a helping hand. The plain fact of it was, being 'a little bloke' in the sometimes mind-dulling scheme of things, he couldn't afford to take on staff.

If the Reg Conroys of this world—and their masters—got their way, Billy was convinced he would become smaller still in their FAR GREATER SCHEME OF THINGS.

'Cut above the rest?' Billy mused. 'So's your royalty. A cut I can't afford.'

Billy continued with his little chore behind the counter. Every time he restocked the card there seemed to be more batteries. He could remember back to when a body could buy only two batteries—one to stick under the hood of

your car, the other to pack into the thick handle of a torch. Both would last yonks and get you where you were going. Not any more. There were more batteries in sizes and power than you could count on both hands and people seemed less able to get where they wanted to go.

Another, younger, Billy somewhere inside of him sighed; he must be getting old, he thought, pining for 'the good old days'.

'On present turnover—granted.' Reg put on the inscrutable face of a man wise beyond his years, then reverted straight back to form. 'But, Billy boy, once you're part of the family ...'

Billy glanced around.

'In the "family" and "somebody ..."?'

'You're the winner here, Billy!'

' "Winner" too? It just gets better and better, doesn't it?'

The display card stocked, Billy turned his attention to the rabbit on the counter, thinking, cheekily, that he should be sticking a couple of the heavy-duty jobs into the bunny on the other side of the counter. Reg looked as if he could do with a bit of juice despite coming at Billy full-on this afternoon. Was the Mighty Man as mighty as Reg insisted?

'... with our exclusive media buy ...'

'For which I pay,' Billy said, quick to the point, unscrewing the tail on his furry friend who would not do what the marketing bloke from the paint company swore on a stack of Bibles it would do—persuade Billy's customers

to buy the brand of paint the bunny was flogging with its silly little neon can-of-paint hat. Billy told the bloke the product was a dog. No way! The bunny, and the starring role it played in the company's latest TV campaign, would change all that.

Another joker who put all his faith in The Box, Billy thought. Maybe he should put Reg and the paint bloke together and they could preach each other the gospel of The Sure Thing. Just wait until the bloke showed his face around here again. The back room was stacked to the rafters with the stuff.

'You're not getting a bit tired? Pedalling round here every couple of weeks, flogging a dead horse?' Billy said.

'You *will* be a Mighty Man, Billy. You'll be knocking them back with a baseball bat!' Reg glowed.

The bunny's tail came off in Billy's hand and four batteries rolled onto the glass counter. Two were smaller than the others.

'My turnover ... is going to increase ...' Billy took his time hooking this worm, 'if I stand there ...' he jerked a thumb at the open doorway, while puzzling over the two stray batteries, 'with a baseball bat ...' he gazed straight at Reg, 'and dong my customers over the head when they come in here to spend their money?'

Scratching his head, Billy wondered if the reason the paint was a bow-wow was because the rabbit wasn't properly juiced. How could it

do its job if it wasn't properly juiced?

Reg was momentarily stumped. His grin froze and he tried to throw an expansive gesture over his sudden catatonia.

'Billy,' it finally came to him, 'these are changing times ...'

Well—that was profound.

'So I've noticed, Reg. So've a couple of million other people trying to squeeze a quid out of business.'

'The quick and the dead!'

'Donging my customers with a baseball bat, I'm not surprised some of 'em would end up worse for wear.' Billy glanced at the door as he stuck four red'ns, all the same size, up into the rabbit. 'Those not quick enough to shoot through before I took another swing at 'em.'

Billy screwed the tail back on and shot it a threatening look: Get on with it, rabbit! He pressed the button at the back of the toy. Not a murmur.

'Billy, Billy, Billy ...'

'You've got the right bloke, Reg.'

'Billy ... don't get left behind. Do you realise, a few years from now, people won't leave their homes to shop ...?'

This part interested Billy. With the rabbit chocka with red'ns and as useless now as when it carried the wrong combination, he decided to give Reg the benefit of his full attention.

'That right, now?'

'They'll simply punch their order into a

home thingamajig—presto! Can of paint ... brushes ... wallpaper? Straight from a Mighty Man warehouse to their front door!’

Impressed as he was when someone gave him an insight into a future he figured was as uncertain as the present (if these same geniuses couldn’t get the present right, how could they be expected to hit the next stage anywhere near the bullseye?), Billy allowed a judicious nod of the head, accompanying it with a scratch of the chin.

‘You’re saying ... I won’t need a baseball bat?’

Exasperation set in too easily with Reg some days.

‘Billy, Billy, Billy ...’

‘Still me here, killer.’

‘Billy?’ the young voice, matter-of-fact, but not without charm, came from behind Reg.

Casey, Billy’s 16-year-old daughter, stood in the doorway, an image of post-holocaust chic, school dress smothered by op shop bargains, peering over the top of a pair of granny glasses, reluctant to make a full commitment about entering the shop. This reluctance, to Billy’s way of thinking, typified much about kids today. Or, perhaps it was just the Appleby genes making themselves known? He hadn’t seen enough of Casey since she hit her teens—somewhere back around last Friday, it seemed to Billy—to make a full appraisal of his theory.

Now, as he had done every day from the time of her birth, he gazed upon her and realised

she had Louise, her mother, written all over her. It was always in the eyes, full lips and slightly flared nostrils constantly forewarning anyone foolish enough to think it: *Mess with me, buster, at your peril!* But lately it was mostly in the way she presented herself to the world at large. The gawkishness was fading as she gained height, confidence—no, make that *more* confidence.

Dangerously more confidence.

Look where it took Louise.

To add further to Billy's fears that he was living with the past unfolding before his eyes was the hint conveyed by the youngster, just as Louise did, that she knew something extra special about worldly matters that was denied to mere mortals such as he.

When he had nothing better to do than inflict pain upon himself, he would try and put his finger on exactly what it was—this sense of certainty mother and daughter shared. It was a form of emotional acupuncture, six-inch nails replacing the fine needles used by practitioners of the art.

'Case ...' Billy was glad of the diversion. Playing with Reg like an alley cat kicking around its mousey supper got a bit tiresome after the first couple of conversational blocks and tackles.

'Casey? Your daughter, Billy?' Reg, too, was glad of the interruption. Nothing like tugging on the personal heartstrings to kick The Sell towards the goals.

Allowing Reg a glance she would normally

reserve for one of the sixth-form drongos, a.k.a. SFDs, Casey realised she would have to make the full commitment and step into the shop if she had any hope of getting her hands on what she had come for. Her pals, Kristin, Alex and Melody—presenting various ideas of the Mad Max apocalypse in *their* dress—waited outside on the footpath, a lead weight upon her. They were in that no-man's-land for *all* kids, Parental Territory, and being clocked by anyone—most of all the SFDs—hanging outside Appleby Hardware was not their idea of making social advancement in this trend-eat-trend world.

'Reg Conroy—Mighty Man Hardware.' Reg stuck a hand out to Casey, the two gold rings and the bracelet catching the harsh late afternoon light and momentarily sending a flash of flared stars across Casey's field of vision.

Casey glared at Reg—*Are you for real?* written all over her face—and ignoring Reg's hand as if she was being offered a banana that had gone off in the sun, faced Billy, and hitched her school bag back onto one shoulder where it had slipped down her arm.

'Jeez!' Reg sized her up, more intent on conveying *himself* to her in memory than appraising her. 'Haven't ... you ... shot ... up?' Before she had a chance to respond—if she had it in mind to—he stepped carefully around her. 'Got her mum's looks, too, Billy.' He darted a look at Billy, nodding agreement at his own observation as he continued 'inspecting the goods'.

'Aaaaah, busy, Case.' Billy didn't like the way this could go.

Reg placed himself squarely between Casey and the counter, giving Billy the benefit of studying the expensive—extremely expensive—cut of the back of his jacket.

'Reg Conroy! Your old "Unca Weg!"' He affected a rolling motion, all the movement coming from the waist up, elbows stuck out, reliving a time when ... 'Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy! Wore me to a frazzle, you did!'

Casey wanted to be other places—anywhere! Stuck with the SFDs!

'Your dad'n me,' Reg bulldozed on through, 'we go back to when Adam was a pup! Started in "the biz" round the same time. Plunked a bit of the banjo in my time.' His chest expanded noticeably. 'I'm with the Mighty Man Corporation now ...'

'You said that.' Casey's voice was flat. Then the penny dropped. 'Here? Mighty Man?'

'Really busy, Case!' Billy said, hurriedly.

'Once Billy and me get a couple of the finer points sorted out ...'

Reg, rejuvenated, busied himself with his slim black briefcase, treating it as if it contained the document announcing a cure for the common cold. A handy item, a briefcase. Made the unprofessional appear to be at the top of the corporate heap; the bloke with all the time in the world on his hands look busy; and a bloke as flash as a rat with a gold tooth make it appear as if the world

would end on the stroke of midnight if something inside the case was not attended to *that very moment*.

Reg's manner conveyed a suggestion of all prospects—with a possible hint of other dimensions not immediately springing to mind.

'I need twenty.' Casey was like a Scud missile targeted straight at the cash register. She punched the drawer open.

'Scat!' Billy gave her hand a sharp tap. 'You've had your pocket money.'

'It's important!' Casey held her smarted hand, flushing.

The two words—and they may as well have been carved in stone and carried down from the mount by Moses on slabs along with the few choice hints God chose to pass on to His people—*it's important*.

Crisis! Red alert!

I have a zit!

The SFDs are making my life unbearable! They won't even acknowledge I exist!

And so on it went, snippets of life Billy picked up as Casey was either on her way *to* the front door with one of the recycled 1960s moppets waiting outside—or *on* her way back through the door and up the stairs to her room with the same mob. Or having open heart surgery performed on herself in the midst of a phone conversation it would take an unemployed KGB agent working overtime to decipher.

'*It's important, egghead,*' Billy muttered.

'You've still had your pocket money—right up to the year 2005 the way I figure it.'

'Okay,' defiance crept pleasurably into her voice, 'I'll just have the gang over to our dump ...'

No way was she going to win this one. *No way.*

The kettle boiled merrily between them for a long, long moment—the Appleby genes whirling merrily away—while Reg continued to busy himself, bending to the open briefcase on the counter, the raised top disguising whatever he was digging out from the obvious treasures that lay within.

Billy glanced at Kristin outside, sharing a packet of smokes around, eager young hands plucking cigarettes out, his mind racing on overdrive: the whole gang back! Fags! Whole place going up in smoke!

'You can just see you'n your old man, can't you?' Reg popped his head above the raised lid of the briefcase. 'Part of the Mighty Man family?'

'This family's fine the way we are!' Billy hit the cash register. A twenty magically appeared in his hand and in an instant, just as magically, was in Casey's hand. 'No fags!'

Billy had a flash—I should be flogging a magic act, not wasting my time with this lot, the way I make money appear and disappear like that. Of course, I would need Casey as my assistant to make the act work.

'Ta!' In a flash that would have done an

Olympic competitor proud, she was on her way towards the door, bringing him back to reality.

Billy decided to push his luck at this parental authority thing: 'You be home before I leave.'

About to step through the door, Casey was stopped in her tracks by her 'ol' Unca Weggie'.

'Case!' Reg reprised his 'bouncy-bouncy-bouncy' gesture, grinning like a loon. She smiled blankly, made to move and was kept back again by Billy.

'I mean it, young lady. Home by seven.'

Casey gave a shrug he could read as a 'maybe' or, pushing his luck, an 'I guess so'. Of course, there were a couple of dozen other variations best left to that retrenched KGB agent. She joined her pals outside, immediately taking an offered cigarette from Kristin, the one who had taken it upon herself to preserve all that was sacred in the persona of Cilla Black in dress, looks and mannerism, down to her personality and scouse accent.

Scowling, Billy weighed up his options where Casey was concerned. A handful she was—no getting away from it. Her mum's looks? No stepping around that one, either. The Appleby genes—yep! And ...

'Got Louise written all over her ...' Reg mused. 'Kids, eh?' He snapped the briefcase top down. An impressive, very expensive brochure emblazoned with the purple and gold Mighty Man logo, which the untrained eye might have sworn was paid for with a generous portion of

the national debt, was gripped in one hand, ready to belt him around the head with its persuasive contents.

'Tell you what I'm gonna do, Billy,' Reg went on, opening the cover of the brochure with all the style of a TV host—*Billy Appleby, This Is Your Life!*—distracted by the importance of his own body language and giving Billy the break he needed to move away from the counter for parts unknown. At least, known only to him right at this juncture. 'I'm going to leave this for you. It answers every question you're likely to ...'

Waiters in restaurants where it was best to contemplate a second home mortgage before visiting them presented wine lists in this way when they were just a tad certain of relieving the clientele of a few weeks' pay for a bottle of plonk.

It took a few delayed moments for a simple fact to break through Reg's brain cells: he was doing his presentation to an empty counter.

'Billy ...?' He looked around, very puzzled, rising on his toes, peering over the counter. 'Billy ...?'

'Mr Apples? He not here?'

Reg glanced around, facing Johnny Teng, a dapper Chinese gentleman decked out in paint-speckled Hawaiian shirt, old Levi cut-offs and thongs. A dollop of lime green paint sat squarely on the tip of his nose.

'He was—just a minute ago ...'

Johnny Teng glanced at his watch. 'Haven't

got all day,' he announced, giving Reg the impression there was a mystical purpose to his statement. He glanced at the rabbit on the counter and let his eyes rise heavenward a second (leaving no doubt in Reg's mind that the rabbit was fronting *the* losing line in *losing* lines) and went for the shelves of paint, making his selection with the ease that Bonnie and Clyde might have possessed in their heyday.

Loaded down with four large cans, Johnny Teng dug deep into a pocket only to realise his hand was poking out through a hole and under the bottom of the cut-offs. Changing the cans to his other arm, he tried the second pocket, coming up trumps. Counting out the notes with his teeth, Johnny Teng leant over the counter and, without needing to look, punched the correct button. The till tray sprang open. He poked the money into the tray, gave Reg a nod goodbye and departed, whistling merrily to himself.

Gazing forlornly at the brochure still in his hand, reality sinking in, Reg returned it reluctantly to his briefcase and was about to close the top when a voice inside, part-Lethal Gibson and part-Arnie Terminator, ordered him to stand his ground. He retrieved the brochure and placed it upright on the cash register, gazing around the seemingly empty shop with something approaching a wistful expression.

'You *will* be a contender, Billy ...'

With delivery like this, Lethal Mel wouldn't have made it past Weapon One and *no one* would

take Arnie's threat, that He Would Be Back, with a grain of salt. Right now, it was the best Reg could muster as the sun sank in the West across the Great Honeypot he just *had* to believe was out thataways.

Lugging the briefcase that no longer announced anything other than being in the hands of a man who had, well, not actually *failed* to scale the walls but who had fallen way short of his objective, Reg left, a slump to his shoulder pads.

Giving it a full minute, Billy poked his head out from behind the wall display of carpentry tools at the end of the shop where he had taken refuge in a tiny alcove, and surveyed his domain with the expressive look of the subdued victor. Where Rocky might have punched the sky with a mighty victory cry—*yes!*—it was in the Appleby genes to keep the wins (as few and as far between as they were) in the ballpark of a soft 'Gotcha!'

Gripping a make-believe baseball bat, he took a swing at an imaginary ball, making a clucking sound as bat and ball connected.

In Billy's mind's eye, the ball arced down the length of the shop.

For a split second, he could have sworn the ball was trailed by a long string of stardust. Then again, it could well have been the light reflected from the sun bouncing off the headlights of a passing truck—ever so fine stardust, just as in *Peter Pan*, when he was a tyke, whenever

Tinkerbelle (whom he had a crush on) flew about.

The ball hit Rabbit the Useless on the counter. The neon light over the bunny's head lit up!

Billy stared at it, then at his make-believe bat still in his grip, trying to make the connection. Definitely had not been a Bunny Berigan kind of day!

CHAPTER

2

'OOOooooo—Why, YYeeeeeeess ...' Ita's response rose ever so thinly from way, way down deep inside and pressed itself through lips taking on the shape of two prunes squeezed one on top of the other. Two dried prunes.

Very much the housewife striving for a shot at the single life after Perc, her wayward electrician husband, made sparks in the wrong household with the wife of a local councillor. Thereby bringing the wrath of the cuckolded party down on him with such force that the electrical contracts Perc held with the council were torn up before his very, saddened, eyes. Now Ita was determined to take on a new persona and further aggravate Perc's dismal mood by having a fling of her own. She aspired to a look sort of torn and taped together from back issues of *New Idea* and *Woman's Day* fashion and beauty spreads.

And she had chosen the New Moon hair-dressing salon—on the other side of a florist which stood between New Moon and Appleby

Hardware—to take the first step into this nether world of singles bars and discos.

'YYYYeeeeEEEsss ... I seeeeeEEEE,' Ita tapped at the sides of her hair, as if a swallow's nest had materialised on her head, and sucked her lips back to wet them before returning them to their former station. 'oooooOOOOHH! ... mmmmMMMM ...'

'I'm sure I left them right here ...' Julie Coates held audience with herself at the front desk, shuffling the appointment book and sundry papers around. On the cusp of thirty—a woman very much into herself externally while making a commitment to world-bettering as an internal quest—Julie could not abide that irritating side of her that misplaced things.

Kate Hammond, the salon's hands-on proprietor, leaned into Ita's view in the wall mirror, glancing across at Julie.

'Last time I saw them they were in the front of the appointment book—I think ...' Plagued with guilt, Kate tried her damndest to be casual about the lost items. Taking a perky, no-nonsense approach to life, deceit—even in what she believed was a good cause—didn't rest easy with her.

'Well ... they're not there now.' Julie bit her bottom lip, flipping the front of the appointment book open for a double-check.

Kate gently poked and prodded Ita's hair with the thin handle of a brush. The style wasn't one Kate would have chosen herself—even if she

were blind. It smacked of early ABBA. Frida, the red-headed member of the group.

Twenty years ago, when Ita fell for Perc like the proverbial ton of red house bricks, there was something . . . well, new and different—very different—in the air.

Jesus Christ Superstar!

Hair!

Grease!

Rocky Horror!

Ita couldn't get enough of the magic. It was everywhere. On radio, the box, the stage. Exactly where it was today.

Jesus Christ Superstar!

Grease!

Hair!

Rocky Horror!

And Ita's generation of fellow Baby Boomers was taking one last stab at their youth before it was cannibalised completely by their sons, daughters, and, worst of all, grandkids!

Yes! Now was the time to grab her destiny with both hands before she found herself wearing paisley flares and licking a Godspell passionfruit icy-pop flogged to her by some popsy on the box who looked like a junior, junior version (twice removed) of what she once was.

'Yes . . . ?' Kate's tone was positive, despite the doubt wafting around her sensory equipment.

When Ita discovered what Perc had been up to, this inkling came to her, a vision sort of thing

if you believed—and Ita did—that they were like bookends, these musicals, thrusting her into the arms of the great log back then and now repulsing him.

For someone who had kept herself aware of the changing times for most of her educated life through the pages of these women's magazines, this 'bookend' theory, for her, was akin to an intellectual leap of great magnitude.

'You don't think ...?' Ita moved her head ever so slightly in either direction, searching for a spark of enthusiasm.

Kate's brow furrowed at Ita's negative tone.

'No, of course not ...' Ita gave herself a mental Chinese burn, trying another angle, poking her chin towards the mirror to peer back upon herself. 'Mmmmmmm ...'

'Mmmmm ...' Kate had to agree. She had nowhere else to go with this one. An 'mmmmmm' just about said it all.

'It's ... it's ...' Ita tried another tack. It took her straight up a blind alley as Kate produced the clipping Ita had brought in with her.

'Yes, it is, isn't it?' Kate smiled. 'You would never pick the difference.'

This left Ita with little ground to manoeuvre on. The hairstyle worn by the model in the clipping and this—whatever it was! stuck on her head—were almost identical. So why didn't Ita look like a million bucks? The model's twin sister?

Was it the light moustache above her top lip?

Was it the emerging jowls?

Maybe it had something to do with the fifty or so—okay, okay, sixty!—kilos difference in their weight?

Perhaps it was ... *no, I don't want to even think about all the other possibilities!*

'Know what I think, Ita?' Julie chirped, leaning into Ita's mirror sight-line, 'I think you look absolutely ...'

Ita waited for the word.

Smashing?

Sensational?

Out of this world?

Unfortunately for Ita's self-esteem the phone rang at the very moment Julie was about to complete her observation and she turned away to answer it.

'New Moon,' Julie's voice took on a mature, woman-of-the-world air, her eagerness to project this image she had of herself to the person on the other end of the phone triggering an expansive gesture of the hand, knocking a shampoo display container from the counter into the wastepaper basket below.

'See!' Kate beamed at Ita, filling in the momentary gap of silence left by Julie's swift departure to the counter. 'And Julie knows her hairstyles.'

Ita's smile had nowhere else to go, not unless she moved her ears. She nodded agreement, at a complete loss for words, hand twirling expressively as all her being screamed

silently inside her—*It's awful, awful! I have never been so humiliated in all my life!*

'I don't know what to say, Kate,' she finally managed, cowardice winning the day as usual.

'Don't thank me.' Kate tapped her on the shoulder, then took the clipping away. 'Just seeing you like this is thanks enough.'

'Found them!' Julie gave a delighted cry. She leaned down to the wastepaper basket and came up with the elusive items—two tickets—waving them across at Kate.

'Can't think how they got there ... ' Kate lied, helping Ita from the chair.

Julie turned to a wall mirror next to the counter and inserted the tickets into the frame, humming gaily. The melody nearly stuck in her throat as she turned back to face Ita on the other side of the counter, a fifty dollar note in her hand, eager to be gone.

And in a wink, scrunching her change in her hand, fumbling with a pair of sunglasses to, hopefully, disguise her humiliation, she was gone.

'I tried to tell her,' Kate sighed, watching Ita hurry past the window on her way. She turned her attention to Julie and the tickets—*Kindred Souls: A Journey into Your Unknown Lives*—still hopeful of a way out of this commitment. 'You're sure about this, Julie ... ?'

'Another soul!' Julie's passion rose. 'Just bursting to break free! It's ... ' Words failed her. 'Maybe more than one, who knows ... ?'

Kate set about tidying the salon following a brisk day of business.

'My soul's quite content on its own.'

'We owe it to ourselves—to open doors on the ... *mystery* of what we *are*!'

'Some people are content being who they are—have you stopped to consider ...' Kate paused, looking at Julie, hopeful that this might sink in, 'maybe who you are is enough?'

'I want this for you as much as for me.' Julie came up behind Kate, squeezing her shoulders. Kate flashed an attempt at an appreciative smile to her in the mirror. 'We're bugs ...'

'Bugs?' The leap in logic escaped Kate.

'Teensie-weensie bugs—'til, one day, we sprout wings and—*wallah!* We become beautiful butterflies!' Julie paused, a tad too seriously. 'You know, metaphorically speaking ...'

Kate weighed the analogy, quietly unconvinced.

'Moths.'

'Moths ...?' Julie considered the notion, then nodded. 'Right—moths.'

'So where does "Mr Right" fit into all this ... "wing-sprouting"?' Kate found it difficult not to let her impatience show.

'He can pick the difference between a b—', Julie caught herself, '—*moth* and a butterfly.'

Kate nodded. 'Of course—metaphorically.'

Billy almost had the last of the array of ladder, large cans of paint on special (in a vain effort to

diminish the stock in the back room), and the odds-and-sods that usually cluttered the footpath in front of his store, returned inside.

The late afternoon air was thick with the smell of King Street, and the gentle fragrance that drifted from the adjoining flower shop. Billy's nostrils were tantalised with the enticing, aromatic blend of fresh flowers.

Anna, the shop's proprietor, was large in every sense of the word. 'Subdued' was not a word that crept into the gravitational pull of her world, in fact, it did not get a look-in.

'She's some bitch of a day, eh, Billy?' she commented with the kind of sweeping gesture used by Mussolini in those balcony chats he was fond of having with the masses before they cottoned on to him and strung him up by his feet like a piece of salami.

'Can't complain,' Billy shrugged, stepping up to the abundant display of flowers Anna was unenthusiastically returning to her shop. He took his time selecting a nice, plump red rose. His favourite.

'You come into the flower business, you sure complain.' Anna watched Billy carefully remove a single stalk from the two dozen in the bucket. 'The way some people spend their monies ...'

'You wouldn't be interested in a couple of dozen cans of paint, Anna?'

'A single rose,' Julie said. 'How romantic.'

She was waiting on the footpath while Kate

locked the salon, watching Billy pay for the rose. Kate glanced in Billy's direction.

'A dozen would be more romantic.'

'That's what I need,' Julie sighed, 'a man who'll just—on the spur of the moment—buy me a single red rose ...'

In this life or the next? Kate thought, watching Billy break the stalk and feed the rose into his jacket lapel.

'Looks like we both need one,' Kate said, her vanity pricked.

'Just a tick,' Julie said, taking the salon key from Kate. 'Don't move!'

She unlocked the door and went back inside. Anna took two buckets of flowers back into her shop, leaving Billy facing Kate, pleased as punch to see her.

'Picked up a cheeky little vino,' he said and stepped towards her, rubbing his hands together in anticipation, 'to go with the trout.'

'Lightly fried in butter,' Kate said, tasting it already.

'Touch of dill.'

'Pinch of pepper.'

He read the disappointment in her face.

'I promised Julie I'd join her for this lecture she's going to,' Kate said.

'No sweat.' Billy put a brave face on it.

'Are you catching a cold?' Kate asked with genuine concern.

'No,' Billy replied, his voice thick. 'Just a ... tickle, you know. Dropping by later?' He

made the last bit slip ever so casually off the cuff.

'Depends what time we finish.'

Julie returned with the two tickets. 'Mind's a sieve.'

'Who's the guru this week?' Billy couldn't help himself. Julie was always attending a lecture or seminar in her search for The Meaning Of Life. The *real* Meaning Of Life—not the mundane stuff like getting hitched and having kids and running a home, not Julie.

Somewhere out there was this ... *mystical life-force* and it was The Source of Every Man, Woman and Child who had ever lived. And it *connected* Us All in This Life and The One To Come. She rang so many rings around him with her myriad ancient rituals and beliefs that his head buzzed like an electric saw for a week once he allowed her to get going.

'It's nothing like that,' Julie retorted, her defences shooting up.

Billy knew he was onto something here. 'Pity about that last bloke—the Tibetan cadger ...'

'There's more to it than meets the eye.' Julie's voice couldn't hide the fact that Billy had touched a sore point. She tapped her wristwatch pointedly at Kate.

'Yes, s'pose we have to be off ...' Kate said.

'Bye, Billy.' Julie grabbed Kate's arm with one hand and threw Billy a wiggly-fingers wave, leading Kate away, lowering her voice to one ear: 'He could at least buy you one rose.'

Billy watched Kate go and lifted the rose, taking a whiff as he stepped inside to set the alarm.

'And when was the last time a bloke brought you even one rose ...?' Kate asked, retrieving her arm.

'I'm looking for something more from a man—something ... deeper. Kindred souls ...'

This time, Kate couldn't help herself. 'In this world—or the next?' And before Julie could reply, Kate grabbed her by the arm, picking up the pace. 'Come on, we'll miss the train.'

CHAPTER

3

Sid Brooks was a tall piece of work and if he had to nominate one job in the world least suited to his stature, a driver of State Transit Authority buses would be the singular mode of employment that would fail to get his juices going.

His shift ended for the day, Sid steered his rig through the wide gates of the inner city depot, glad to be off roads owned more and more by society's maniacs. How half of them (make that three-quarters!) ever got their licences stumped him. He had some idea of how the insanity of Sydney's taxi business operated, but the licensing of the average driver ...?

Today, he had had to contend with more than his share of both. Taxi drivers who must have stepped straight through immigration to get behind the wheels of cabs (owned by cousins and uncles, part of extended families that extended right through Asia and the Far and Middle East) were drawn to Sid's bus like leeches to flesh.

Waving to the security guard on duty at the gates, Sid was glad the worst of the week was over.

His rising spirits were quickly dampened when he caught sight of a foreboding figure standing on the very spot he was driving towards to park the bus.

'Oh, Jesus wept! What now?' Sid moaned to himself.

Hands clasped tightly behind his back, shoulders squared, hat worn in a way that went out of fashion with those stiff upper lip British military flicks of the 1950s (the peak tugged down almost to nostril level so that the wearer had to tilt his head back at an unnatural angle to peer out onto the world), Supervisor Frank Rost was a concrete signpost amplified in Sid's brain: ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER (i.e. your parking space).

Rost had never really forgiven his parents for not having had him in time to storm the beach at Normandy. That they would not even have been in their teens at the time necessary to carry out this act of patriotic procreation was a point Rost was not prepared to concede. He lessened his disappointment by collecting the largest stash of British World War II and POW videos in the Western world.

Tempted as he was to leave his foot exactly where it wavered, an inch over the brake pedal, and let the bus roll slowly over Rost, thereby bringing some sunshine and joy

into the lives of those Rost hovered over as their own personal storm cloud, Sid, nevertheless, did what in his heart-of-hearts he knew to be the right thing.

He applied the brake, but not without darting a look skyward: 'This is one you owe me.'

Rost strode slowly from in front of the bus, around to the front-side door while Sid took his own sweet time gathering the money tray and his belongings. If he was in the poo, he was in the poo, so why hurry the execution process along? A sharp tap on the door quickly brought an end to this vain attempt at standing up to authority.

Opening the door, Sid stepped down, looming over Rost by a good six inches, knowing full well this discrepancy in height did nothing to alleviate the tension that constantly existed between the two.

'Brooks, Brooks, Brooks ... what are we going to do with you?'

'Something on your mind, Frank?' Sid willed himself to slouch, bending his body at the waist in the hope that by lowering himself an inch or two he might lessen the pain of the executioner's axe.

Rost nodded slowly, tut-tutting.

'Something on my mind ...?' Rost's eyes bored out from under the peak of his hat, along his nose and up into Sid as he reached inside his jacket and brought out some folded sheets of

papers. He unfolded them precisely, not taking his eyes off Sid for a moment.

Which one are we going to be delivered today? Sid wondered. 'We shall fight them on the beaches?'

Maybe the Alec Guinness speech to his Japanese captor on the River Kwai. That was always a good'n. Matter of fact, Sid was quite partial to it.

'Four-O-One, Brooks.'

Nope, definitely not Alec or Winston.

'Four . . . O . . . One, Frank?'

'*Four-O-One*. Third time this week you've missed the connection, Brooks.' Rost moved up and down on toes seemingly stuck together with glue. 'I know your game, Brooks.'

'Four-O-One . . . ?'

In a flurry, Rost held up the papers to Sid, slapping them as he barked, 'Here! Here!', turning pages, slapping each one, '*And—Here! Here!*', laying on the psychotic drill sergeant with gusto.

Sid frowned. It was all he could think of to do. He had to show some sign of remorse. Rost was putting a lot into this. The least he deserved was a frown.

'It's no good trying to worm your way out of this! The facts speak for themselves!' Rost waved the time sheets in Sid's face. 'If I see one more example of your complete disregard for the rules, I will have no choice but to . . .'

Here it comes, Sid thought, throwing in

another frown, followed by a grimace.

... but to—take steps!’ Rost pocketed the papers. ‘Serious steps. I hope I have made myself clear.’

‘As glass, Frank.’

Rost didn’t appear to be satisfied.

‘I mean ... as crystal, Frank.’

That didn’t appear to satisfy Rost either.

‘As clear as *crystal* glass, Frank.’

‘That’s what I want to hear.’ Rost stepped back. ‘Good, good.’ He turned sharply on one heel. ‘Very good.’ And strode off.

Sid let out a loud sigh. ‘Four-O-bloody-One.’ At this juncture, it was the bane of his life. He had to find another line of work to occupy the next twenty-five years of his life, otherwise he was going to be up on murder charges before he knew it, my oath he was. Frank Rost had a way of getting under a bloke’s skin—strangling the mongrel was probably the only way of getting rid of the bugger.

Often, in the wee small hours, Sid would wake, scratching, scratching, convinced Rost was all over him. He had nightmares about 401 and he had worse nightmares about Rost.

Usually, Sid was trapped in some German POW camp and Rost was the mug running the place, deciding who was going to break out and who was going to stay put. No surprises there! The camps changed from time to time, as did the other POWs. (One nightmare had them locked up in Colditz castle with only a teaspoon to dig

out a quarter-mile tunnelling) What didn't change was Sid being the last prisoner left in camp (guess who wielded the teaspoon in Colditz?) with Rost, who had let everyone else make a dash for it.

Things were getting strange in Sid's mind, he knew that, and it was past a joke, driving buses and putting up with Hitler and the Blitzkrieg in the form of Frank-bleeding-Rost.

To calm himself, Sid took his trumpet mouthpiece from the top pocket of his regulation shirt and gave it a blow. He walked across the yard towards the locker room, blowing out a sweet rendition of 'St Louis Blues', recalling the kid he once was, out in the open country, blowing a tune with a gumleaf on his comb.

A couple of hours and he could get Rost off his chest by blowing his brains out on W. C. Handy and sad Lady Day. By the time he reached the door to the locker room, Sid had decided that life wasn't that bad after all. This is the way it usually went with him. A bit of a blow and the sun came out—even when it was coming down cats and dogs.

Still, he had to do something about his dilemma or accept the inevitable—he was born to be a bus-drivin' man. And that thought was too horrible to contemplate.

CHAPTER

4

Rusty and Charcoal were ravenous.

The sight of a kindred spirit being gently fried in butter, herbs and dill not three feet from their fishbowl forebode of two possibilities: the human thing sipping a glass of vino while he stood over the frying pan tapping out a tune with a long fork would forget they needed food, or, if they kicked up a fuss—Rusty suggested taking a backflip out of the bowl onto the sink to grab his attention—they could very well end up amongst the butter, herbs and dill for some future repast.

As if wise to their concerns, Billy stopped humming with his very numb throat and glanced across at the bowl.

'Sorry, fellows. Forgot you were there.' He reached for the fish food.

Typical! Forgot we were *here*!

It was every fish for himself when the flakes of food sprinkled by Billy hit the surface of the water.

'Anyone'd think you hadn't eaten for days,' Billy leant up to the bowl and watched them ascend and devour, suggestive of trainee piranhas.

We *haven't*! You forgot to feed us last night!

The phone rang from the hallway. Billy glanced at the pan and moved it off the flame before going to answer the call.

'Appleby Mansions.' A familiar, off-handed voice came back at him. 'You won't be home for dinner ...? McDonald's? You ate there last night ... Oh, that was Red Rooster—two nights ago, was it? My mistake ... just McDonald's, okay? It's a school day tomorrow.' Just as she was about to go, he jumped in, 'No fags!' Casey beat him to it. He was left with a dial tone. 'No fags ...' he repeated listlessly.

Stepping back into the kitchen, the thought struck him—*fags*?

A hand went to his throat: was that what was behind this? All those cancer sticks? He hadn't lit one in six years. Who could tell, though? Maybe a pack a day, then two a day for all those years had laid the groundwork?

Billy went back to the stove, returning the frying pan to the flame, telling himself it wasn't possible. Had to be something else.

Tonsils?

Yes, they had to be the culprits. He felt at the side of his neck for a telltale sign. Nothing. Then he remembered—hadn't he had the buggers snipped when he was a tyke?

'There goes that theory.' Billy shrugged and took a sip of vino, the fish sizzling along nicely, whetting his tastebuds.

A cassette player stood on the benchtop with a stack of cassettes threatening to topple over next to it. Billy left the fish for a few moments, stepped to the player, switched on the power and pushed the play button. Billie Holiday was exactly where he had left her when he switched the player off last time, midway through a song.

Billy sang along with Lady Day, surprised he didn't disgrace himself, his throat being the way it was. A kind of Lady Day mellowness wandered around what passed for his singing voice.

Shifting the cooked fish from pan to plate, he decided to check with his doctor the following day if his throat hadn't improved. Probably some bug doing the rounds. *Always* some bug or virus or thingamajig doing the rounds these days and five would get you ten it would take a liking to Billy and make itself comfortable within his system.

The fish was quickly joined by a couple of boiled spuds and a serving of green peas.

Sitting before his repast, Billy faced the rose sitting in a long, thin wineglass of water. He topped up his glass of vino. Kate didn't know what she was missing.

'Probably some kind of conspiracy . . . ' Billy mused, cutting into a piece of fish and eating it slowly.

Yes, he could see how it could work. The doctors get together and they search the world for all these viruses—not anything over-nasty, just enough to hit you like a sledge hammer for a few days—and they spread them around then sit back and wait for the onslaught into their surgeries. And all on the Medicare card.

‘Nice work if you can get it,’ he said aloud, eating slowly.

Now, why wasn’t there a government card for hardware purchases? It’d solve the problem of all those cans in the back of the shop . . . that’s if he could work out some kind of scheme that would *make* people buy the useless stuff. He should have listened to his dad.

‘If you just want to earn a crust, all right, go into hardware. If you want to make *money*, don’t be a mug! Get into medicine—or law! That’s the only way you’ll make a quid in this life. Short of becoming a politician. Be a pollie, then you’ve got the keys to the bloody vault and no one’ll be any the wiser!’

Funny, his old dad didn’t mention music as an alternative. And for good reason. Music, to him, was something you made with two spoons slapped on your knee after a few pints at home with the uncles and aunts who once poured into the house like they were refugees in need of a roof over their heads. Dad could make those spoons do marvellous things, mostly with songs you would normally only hear sailors sing on a Saturday night in the worst part of town.

They came in different shapes and some very strange sizes, the uncles, aunts and cousins; the results of some unusual Celtic couplings over the last few hundred years. They all shared a common bond—the blood running through their veins and the beer flowing just as freely through this lust the Applebys had for life, making the breweries richer by millions, Billy mused.

My, but the Applebys did like a beer.

Not that they could be called boozers. No way. This house had rung with laughter and shouted conversations. Card games too. Ones that could include Billy and his cousins. And Monopoly, snakes and ladders. You name it and they played it and the games seemed to run end-to-end through the long summers and even longer winters of his best days and nights.

Later, childhood past him, the seasons flowed one into the other, until he could no longer tell one day or night apart.

The cramped terrace in an equally cramped street in Newtown had gone through some changes since Billy's folks had died and left it to Louise and himself a little over fourteen months after they had married and moved into what, until their wedding, had been his bedroom.

Billy had gone from childhood to adulthood in this old place and he knew every part of it as well as he knew every part of himself. The part of him known to relatives and friends—and the part he had never exposed to anyone.

Not to mum and dad. Not to Louise. Not to Casey.

That was the part where he kept his fears, failed ambition and the one or two hopes that had not been eroded.

Billy's home was a house of ghosts. Mostly nice ones, and those that weren't fell more into the category of Grumpies rather than out-and-out Horribles.

Once Billy caught his dad, in this very kitchen, digging for Billy's tooth at the bottom of a glass of water with a fork—a shiny new shilling piece in his other hand ready to make the exchange for the Tooth Fairy—it was all over for the child.

The skittles fell then. The Easter Bunny. Father Christmas, and not too long after that, Peter Pan.

The Boy Who Never Grew Up was the last slice of innocence Billy tried to hold onto. Was it because he wanted (needed?) to really believe in Peter or was it because he had a secret crush on Tinkerbell?

If it was the latter, then Billy's hold on all that childhood innocence had truly left him long before these other facts of life came out of the blue and knocked him for a sixer.

The one belief that took longer to fade was a conviction that he was going to be . . . well, as Reg Conroy and his big mouth pointed out today, thereby unknowingly rubbing salt into the wounds, *somebody*.

And Billy's idea of being *somebody* was to be a hot muso.

A member of a band. Playing and singing and generally making a name for themselves.

On the road. *Yes!*

Recording. *Wow!!*

Their own TV show. *Too much!*

Entertaining people. That's what Billy had planned when he was a kid. A big dream suspended in neon lights over the awesome spectre of everything waiting out there for him.

He didn't have a clue where the urge came from. There was no one else in his family, immediate or twice removed, with any musical ambitions. They had no inkling what this strange thing people called 'talent' was.

You couldn't touch it.

You couldn't see, smell or taste it.

So how could it *exist*?

Thinking back on Peter and Tinker and his old man realising he wasn't alone in the kitchen that fateful night—there was his son standing in the doorway, rubbing his eyes sleepily one moment and in sad disbelief the next—Billy's thoughts returned to the bunny on the counter in his store.

He stopped eating, replaying his action with 'bat' and 'ball' on his own private video recorder of the mind. Nothing changed.

He swung at the 'bat' and the thin trail of stardust followed it down the length of the store.

The 'ball' hit the bunny.

The bunny's neon light suddenly lit up.

Oh, there was one difference now. The star-dust kind of hung in midair then sprinkled down onto the bunny.

'You're seeing things!' Billy barked at himself and tucked into the fish. 'Must be something to do with all those Throaties you sucked today!'

He glanced at the wall clock. Time had run away with him. All this procrastinating about the past. He had a gig to play.

How could he say he hadn't fulfilled his ambitions? Here he was, a muso. Hot? Well ... that was debatable and he *was* Entertaining People with The Billy Apples Band—if you could call The Newtown Regulars, their faithful audience at O'Hara's pub, 'people' and if entertaining them was the culmination of all your aspirations?

What about the recordings? Did that—remember? With his ex, Louise? 'Mr Middle Eight', they used to call you ...

Your own TV show? Hey! The Seventies? Hardly a week went by when The Apples, as they were known then, weren't featuring on one of the TV variety shows!

Touring? You couldn't wait to get off the road! Week upon week—one club show kind of phasing into another. From one end of the map to the other. Hardly a motel bed The Apples hadn't experienced.

Dreams lived! Ambitions fulfilled!

Billy rose from the table and went to the sink with his empty plate, draining the last of the vino as he went. It's like the three wishes you get when you find the genie in the bottle, he thought. No matter how much you think it through and make wishes, it is never going to turn out the way you want it to.

There will always be too many unforeseen eventuations to the wishes.

The genie will always get the last laugh.

Genie? Bunnies? Stardust? Peter Pan? Tooth Fairy? For the love of ... where was his head tonight?

Billy fell into song, drawing on his Satchmo voice for one of his dad's Saturday night wrong-end-of-town ditties, determined to put all this wonderland stuff out of his mind before he arrived at O'Hara's.



CHAPTER

5

The Billy Apples Band, as Billy was prone to echoing, had been playing O'Hara's in King Street 'since Adam was a pup'. And to look at some of the 'Newtown Regulars' he often got the idea they'd been around even longer than the band. If God had forebears, then surely they must have derived from O'Hara's.

The same ethnic mix to be found along King Street gathered in the pub, with youth in the minority. Everyone more interested in their own conversations—as repetitive and predictable and as well told as they were—the TV sports channel, computer pokies, pool tables, Jeez!, even two flies walking across the bar, than they were in Billy and the boys.

Rob McSpedden, the plumbing genius Glasgow had somehow lost to the colonies, pounded the ivories with morose abandon—all part of the act he dropped into whenever a new piece of skirt drifted into the place, like the one tonight. A redhead—slumming, no doubt. Or

perhaps new to the area. Just moved into one of the rentals and hadn't yet got a handle on the places 'to be seen in' and 'those to avoid like the plague'.

Sid, on trumpet, tried his damndest to get his mind off Four-O- bloody-One! and the eternal threat of Drill Sgt Rost yanking him from behind the wheel and banishing him to Coventry—Lost Property—at the bus depot where he'd rot until his pension was due.

Mack, on drums (the only parts of him with any movement were his hands and one foot on the pedal), and Jack, plucking away happily on slap-bass (his only discernible moving part being his hands), could be mistaken for animatronic twins, except that Mack was as pale as the sand on Bondi Beach and Jack hailed from an indigenous tribe that could relate tales way back to a time when Australia wasn't called that.

Together—with Billy a good singer, not great, knowing how to put a number across—they managed to fill in three hours a night Thursday to Sunday each week; the ever-present single rose in Billy's lapel as predictable as their repertoire of Satchmo, Louis Jordan, Billie Holiday, et al. Song after song, they encompassed all that was sorrowful, sinful and downright suicidal about a musical form that had blossomed out of the Mississippi Delta and found its way into the bloodstream and psyche of generations far removed from its roots who wouldn't know grits

from grass or a black-eyed pea from the frozen Edgell variety.

Sid fouled a note going into the middle eight. It reverberated through Billy's senses like a piece of chalk scraped across a blackboard. His shoulders went stiff and he shot off a silent missive at Sid who pretended he wasn't aware of what was causing this sudden darkening of Billy's mood.

'I'm getting somewhere,' Rob told himself. 'First base.' He raised one eyebrow across at the redhead being chatted up by Forbes, the burly young copper and all-round footy thug on the playing field. 'She couldn't give twopence for the mug. And she's only turning her back on me to make me lift my game.' Still, he had to admit, it did give the game an edge he could do without tonight.

Kate and Julie hurried towards O'Hara's through an unexpected, light shower.

'So ... you can be whoever you want to be ... ,' Kate said, her head still swimming from the lecture. Forty-odd souls—no, make that forty *odd* souls—cramped into a partly converted church hall that had become a catch-all for a myriad New Age entrepreneurial enterprises verging on public swindle.

'Another soul, Kate,' Julie was on a high, impassioned, ' ... just *bursting* to break free! It's ... it's ... ' Words failed her.

'My soul's quite happy as it is.' Kate wanted to make that understood. Quite happy. Okay,

okay, with one or two exceptions. And she wasn't on her Pat Malone there. She doubted if there was a single soul in the world who could declare they were *completely* happy. Given the unpredictable nature of human expectations, it was a mathematical impossibility. Julie's new-found belief that there were 'other lives' within 'the life' they were living right now only added to the maze.

'We owe it to ourselves . . . to open doors on the . . . mystery of *what we are!*' Jules shielded her hair from the rain with her handbag held overhead, high heels clacking on the exposed pavement leading to the cover the pub lit up through windows that could do with a decent scrub.

'Jules, have you ever stopped to think . . . maybe, *who you are* is quite enough?'

The door of the pub was opened from the inside just as they came to it, a burst of Billy and the boys hitting them square in the face—just a blink before they were presented with one of the Newtown Regulars, Gibson, being marched out by the scruff of the collar and the scrunched seat of the pants, O'Hara doing the 'scruffing' and the 'scrunching'.

'Watch it!' Julie cried, jumping to one side. Kate stepped back on the other side, giving O'Hara a clear aim at the street.

'You're black as far as this pub's concerned!' O'Hara barked, sending Gibson on his way. 'Moron!' She turned sweetly to Kate and Julie. 'Sorry, ladies—spring-cleaning.'

Gibson stumbled in the gutter. 'Aw, have a heart, Maureen. I finally had the mug on the run ...'

O'Hara stood back from the doorway, allowing Kate and Julie to enter, and jerked a thumb back at Gibson. 'Relatives! Why do we bother?' she grumbled as she followed them in.

'I've got my wish-list, okay ...?' Julie went on. 'Who I want to be ...? But ... to be that person ... I mean—*The Big Sleep!*'

Kate gave a shake of the head. '*Rebirth. Incarnation. Opening a door ...*'

'Rebirth?' Julie presented Kate with that same look that had become all too familiar since she had allowed herself to be persuaded to accompany her employee-cum-fond-companion-verging-on-best-friend on these mind-expanding excursions into *The New You*; 'the look' that said, 'I do know what I'm talking about, you know!' 'Same kettle of fish,' Julie continued; 'someone's kicked the bucket!'

'The soul *never dies*. That was the point!' Kate was determined to keep a lid on it. She was not going to allow Julie to bring out the worst in her nature. 'It's only *sleeping*.' There, calm as can be.

Billy was knee-deep in the blues, his song of love betrayed conveyed a whiff of revenge and so on. Julie, momentarily blighted in her discourse, fluttered her eyes at Kate with a sweetness that would have delighted Lucrezia Borgia.

'Timing for the ex ...?'

Kate shrugged off the mere thought. 'Better out than in.'

'Exactly!'

'Exactly?' Kate echoed.

'No—not that,' Julie's hands busied themselves excitedly in the air. 'He said, "The other you—*better out than in!*" Remember? "Why deny the spirit of the souls who have been enriched by experiences way, way beyond our ability to conceptualise it—why deny them their right to release and to . . ."' Julie ran out of steam about the same moment as Billy and the boys wound it up. ' . . . and to . . . ? Damn! I had it right there, on the tip of my . . . '

'Lady Day—Billie Holiday . . . ' Billy stifled a cough at the mike. 'Thank you . . . ' A smattering of applause rippled across the room, coming mostly from Kate. He returned her hello-nice-to-see-you smile, then turned away from the mike, ' . . . for staying awake.' Presenting his back to the patrons, he muttered, 'What do we have to do to get them started? Fart Beethoven's Fifth?'

Rob thumped the keys, Beethoven's Fifth overture—or something he vaguely remembered as such—rumbling across the bar. He brightened. The ruckus was enough to draw the redhead's attention away from the copper. He flashed her a glimpse of his dental work, confident enough in the couple of thousand dollars the thieving dentist had screwed out of him to give it the old McSpedden shot.

'And where's your head tonight?' Billy gave

Sid the benefit of his disgruntled mood. 'The middle eight was a mad dog's breakfast.'

'Woof, woof,' Rob threw back over his shoulder, stepping away from the piano and heading towards the bar.

'Gridlock,' Sid sighed, letting his horn drop at a listless angle in one hand. 'I'm doomed to spend the prime of my life stuck in traffic ... going nowhere ... headed for the precipice of life's unfeeling ...'

'I get the idea,' Billy said. Conversations with Sid had a nasty habit of heading off along dark, unlit highways, never to be sighted by a living soul again.

Hold on—what was this? Something akin to dawn breaking was dancing around Sid's eyes. Billy glanced along Sid's line of sight, landing on Julie. Aha! Gotcha, you sly dog. So, that's who your taste runs to? Well, good luck to you, sport, you're going to need it with that one—doesn't know who *she* is, let alone that you even exist.

There, you mug, Billy thought, she's latched onto that no-hoper Briggs—speaks volumes for her taste. Billy pulled himself up. Come on, you hardly know the kid. Kid. That's it, isn't it? He can't be a day younger than thirty and here you are calling him a 'kid'. Face it, Apples, you're letting too much battery acid into your system. Briggsy's a 'kid'? Why, 'cause you'll never see fifty again? Is this how it's going to be for the twenty or thirty years you, maybe, have going

for you? You're seventy, Briggsy's fifty and he's still a 'kid'?

'Put a sock in it!' Billy found himself saying out loud.

'In what?' Sid turned from tweaking his heart over Julie and Briggsy in animated conversation at the bar.

'What?' Billy asked back.

'Eh?' Sid was confused.

'Forget it.' Billy threw up a hand in frustration then reached for his beer on top of the piano, next to a framed black-and-white photo of Billie Holiday. 'Why do I bother?' he asked Lady Day and knocked back his beer.

Kate was perplexed. A wisp of a smile from Billy when she entered, and now his back. As if she didn't exist. She didn't need this. What had gotten into the man? The last few days he had seemed not to be himself. Not at all, and it bothered the heck out of her. Evasive. Vague. Disgruntled when he was communicative. This wasn't the Billy Apples she had—in the time she had moved into the New Moon salon, what was it? just over two months?—well ... she had come to ... Out with it, lady! Care ... a great deal ... about. Okay! *Love!*

'Penny for them.'

Kate was distantly aware of a voice nearby. Then she felt a nudge on her arm. She turned, focusing on Julie at her side, offering her a drink.

'Welcome back,' Julie said with a knowing smile.

'What are you grinning about?' Kate took the drink.

'Nothing,' Julie replied sweetly, stirring her own drink with a straw. 'Nothing at all.'

'It's not what you think,' Kate glared back at her.

'Didn't say it was.'

'I know you didn't. I'm just telling you—just in case you were thinking it.' Kate took a sip of her drink through tight lips, unable to beckon her mind away from Billy playing with his trombone.

'Snap yourself out of it, man!' Billy ordered himself. 'This isn't like you!' With a sigh, he turned back to Kate, prepared to drum up a cheeky grin to let her know he was more than pleased to see her. And what did he get? Her back! That's what. What did she find so fascinating about Briggsy all of a sudden? Julie and Briggsy he could understand. Kate in animated conversation with the great log? That was another matter entirely.

'Hey, Romeo,' Billy targeted in on Rob at the bar chatting up the redhead. 'Hate to break up your social life . . .'

Rob drained his beer in one, said something to the redhead, then went straight back up to the piano stool on the dais in the far corner of the room and made a run along the piano keys, thumping out the intro to a song, catching Billy, Sid, Mack and Jack unprepared.

Billy glanced at Sid, who glanced back at

him, sharing a momentary fear: *who steps in first?* Leaving nothing to chance, both took up the lead. Billy glared around at Rob who glanced over his hunched shoulders at him with glee—caught you, you bastards!—then homed in on the redhead.

Billy stifled a cough and stepped to the mike, to sing—a chirpy ditty, how it must have been easy for the lady of the piece to move up and steal the man's heart.

Something new . . . different? . . . in Billy's voice reached out across the room and danced playfully around Kate's head. She turned slowly from what was probably the most boring conversation she had ever experienced, with this Briggs-whoever-he-was, unsure of where this different voice was coming from. Then it was gone and she was left facing Billy, realising he was singing straight to her, suggesting to Kate *she* was the lady in question making things a pushover.

'Sure, buster,' Kate mused, allowing Billy a tantalising smile, 'easy as stripping wallpaper—very aged, embossed wallpaper—with a scalpel and a toothbrush.'

CHAPTER

6

'I can be *anyone I want to be?*' Rob squeaked incredibly around a mouthful of chilli squid.

'No,' Kate jumped in, 'not anybody. She's got it all bum about.'

'Have not!' Julie said, chopsticks digging into her bowl of fried rice.

This was Thursday, so it had to be Red Lantern night. Billy and the boys were a bunch of blokes living their lives by rote—work, O'Hara's Thursday to Sunday—and seeing no wrong in it. Life was a simple chore this way. The drinks lined up on the bar the moment they walked into O'Hara's. The meal was waiting at the same table every Thursday night at the Red Lantern. All the boys had to do was drain the glasses and empty the plates.

'Tell 'em, girl.' Sid, seated next to Julie, threw his weight behind her.

'You were asked?' Julie thanked him with a scathing look. Sid quickly raised his bowl of

combined goodies to his mouth to cover his reddening face.

'The point of the exercise is ...' Kate continued.

'You kark it—but you don't have to worry,' Julie announced, her exuberance soaring, 'because you come back again!'

Billy smiled crookedly at Kate next to him: 'You gave up trout and a cheeky chardonnay to swallow this garbage?'

Kate went on the defensive. 'It was ... interesting ...'

'I still don't get it,' Rob said, 'I kark it ...'

'No—you don't kark it,' Julie's tone had taken on the air of the expert in these matters, 'your *old* self's karked it ...'

Confusion set in with Rob. 'What old self?'

'The one you *were*, before *who* you are now,' Julie insisted.

'Yeah,' Kate couldn't resist the opening, 'the one we liked.'

'Before I was who I am *now* ... I was who I was *then* ... and rather happy with my lot too,' Rob declared emphatically and took another drink.

'Is you is, or is you ain't, who's you were?' Billy jumped in.

Rob ignored him, looking at Julie. 'You've lost me.'

'How hard is that?' Billy dropped the question with an innocent air, reaching with his

chopsticks for the plate of untouched stir-fried vegetables on the lazy Susan.

Rob wagged a warning finger at Billy. 'Lip.'

'Don't you two start,' Kate frowned at them.

'Hey, Jools,' Rob said, lowering his beer, 'have a shot at Billy. Never know—he might've been somebody.'

Agitated, Billy, seated across from Rob and the redhead, who had eyes only for the amount of food she could move from the lazy Susan to her bowl, was about to come back at Rob, but Mack got in first.

'You were, Billy.'

'Once,' Jack piped in.

'Somebody,' Mack went on.

'That's more than ... '

'... most people.'

Rob bobbed his head back and forth in time with Mack and Jack's interconnected conversation. The boys ignored him, continuing with their meal in their usual synchronised manner, their chopsticks working in perfect harmony, right down to each selecting a tiny prawn from the fried rice in their respective bowls.

'Yeah, you must give us a medley of your *great hit* sometime ...' the corners of Rob's mouth curled up in a sinister grin. His 'hurtful' grin.

Billy glowered across at Rob, now choosing to ignore him in favour of a morsel fed to him by the redhead.

'Hit ... ?' Kate was in like a shot. A clue! A

hint! *An insight! A key* even! Who knows what door it might open?

"s nothing . . ." Billy waved the question aside with more weight than he intended. Seeing Kate was primed to prompt him further, he busied himself with his food, digging and stirring his chopsticks into his rice and sweet 'n' sour pork.

A silence descended over the table. Sid drummed up the courage to take another shot. 'This really interests me,' he said in something akin to a man-of-the-world approach with Julie.

'To have an *Afterlife*,' Julie's smile was sickly sweet, 'first you have to have a *life*, Sidney.' Sid retreated and Julie returned her attention to Rob, determined not to let him get the upper hand. 'What are you good at?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'A lot.'

Rob shrugged. 'The ivories.' He was amused. Nothing he loved more than taking down a wanker a notch or two. Made his day. And as much as he liked Jools—even though she wasn't his type—this whole you-kark-it-but-you-don't-kark-it-afterlife was a wank with a capital 'W' in bright pink neon with bells on. 'I've always been tops at thumpin' scraggers gettin' too big for their britches . . .'

Julie winced. 'I guess that's a start . . .' She took a deep breath, getting into the part. 'Okay, so in your previous life . . . you must have been . . . ' Losing it, she turned to Kate. 'What . . . ?'

Kate took a drink of wine, dabbing her lips with a napkin. 'You're the expert.'

Julie glared at her, then returned to Rob, momentarily unsure of her ground. 'A ... man with ...' then it came to her in a sudden rush, '... unfinished business!'

Kate blinked in disbelief. 'You've got it!'

'Course I've got it.' Julie couldn't help being full of herself. A shot in the dark and it had paid off—trumps! Brow furrowed, she concentrated on her subject. 'That explains all this pent-up anger. You didn't finish what you set out to do in your previous life. Now ... you're frustrated with yourself ...'

'With himself?' Billy had a hard time taking this in. 'So he thumps other people?'

'I never thumped anyone didn't ask for a goin' over, Billy boy,' Rob cut across him.

'What do you reckon Billy might've been?' Sid couldn't help himself, he had to get some points on the board with Julie. Somehow!

'Leave me out of this!'

'What makes you so special?' Kate nudged him playfully, the 'hit' clue still niggling at her.

'Billy's not prepared to face the truth about himself,' Julie sniffed in a knowing manner.

'Come on, Billy, you never know—you might've been somebody ...' Sid had their attention and there was no way he was going to drop the ball now.

'Why is everybody suddenly saying I'm *nobody*?' Billy felt, well ... he felt exasperated,

suddenly wanting the day to end so he could wake up to a new, a better day than this one had been. 'Funny,' he thought, 'my throat. It doesn't tickle any more. Must've been a twenty-four-hour bug thingamajig.'

'Who said you were nobody?' Kate asked, feeling somewhat peeved herself by his attitude—and other things too.

Billy poked a finger at Sid. 'He did!'

'No, I didn't. All I said was ...'

'All you said was, I could've been somebody!' Billy turned on Mack and Jack. 'And don't you two start again!'

The twins paused, chopsticks raised to their open mouths, looking bewildered—Who us?

'Well, yes, but what I-I-I m-meant was ...' Sid stuttered.

'Will everyone please put a sock in it!' Julie pleaded through gritted teeth, both hands clasp- ing the edge of the table, body rigid. 'How can I be expected to conduct this session with everyone,' her voice rose decibels, '*blabbering?*'

The table hushed. Julie glared around at everyone for good measure, clearing bowls away on the lazy Susan, placing a crystal salt-shaker on the edge of the cleared spot.

'It's about opening doors,' she said wisely. 'A holiday. Kind of ... Now, Rob, you've got to relax yourself completely. Con- centrate on the salt-shaker.'

'Right,' Rob said. 'Concentrating.' He crossed his eyes, presenting a loony face.

Miffed, Julie turned on Mack and Jack. *'The twins.'*

'Concentrating! Concentrating!' Rob drew back to a serious face.

Still of two minds, Julie started to revolve the lazy Susan, the salt-shaker catching the overhead light. 'Let your mind drift ...'

'That's the easy part,' Billy whispered an aside to Kate. She suppressed a smile.

'You're going on a trip ...' Julie intoned.

'Who's driving ...?' Sid's voice came from a distance. He was mesmerised by the revolving shaker dancing with diamonds of light.

Julie ignored him, focusing completely on Rob's trance-like state.

'I want you to confront an emotional barrier ...'

'Gridlock ... Four-O-One ...' Sid said, then let out a breathless cry as Julie gave him a dig in the side with her elbow.

'We're going on a journey ... a journey of discovery ...' Billy was hearing a voice in his head. Telling him he was going on a journey of discovery. This was something different. Something he had not experienced before. A voice talking to him *inside his head*. Nice voice too. Didn't seem to match Julie's face. Strange. Music, too, now. Lovely, lovely melodic strings. Familiar tune.

'Rob, can you hear me?' Julie was *focused*. 'I want you to think of something that could be a barrier to your emotional fulfilment ...'

'Where do I start?' Billy replied softly, no

one taking a blind bit of notice that a 'connection' had been made here between the diamond flashes of light from the revolving salt-shaker, Julie's melodious enticement of Rob and ... *the moment*.

'Barrier ...' Rob uttered, making the sound of someone coming out of a dental anaesthetic. 'Yes ... barrier ... see ... barrier ...'

'Gotcha!' Billy said inside his head, contented that there was room in there for two voices *and* a symphony orchestra playing a Billie Holiday favourite he now identified. 'All Of Me.' He sang along with the tune inside his head. Or thought he did. Was that his voice? No, couldn't be. Too ... high? Too ... pitched? Too ... *distinct* to be Billy Apples. Had to be the other Billie—but what was she doing inside his head? Where was he? Stars? All he could see were stars? Maybe someone had given him a belt in the head? No—there wasn't any pain. Far from it. Stars ... and a moonlit sky that went on forever and ever ...

'What's haunting you, Rob?' Julie homed in. 'What is it that won't leave you alone ...?'

The redhead, who had not wavered from her mission of shifting as much of the food from the table into her stomach as she could reasonably consume, reached for the salt-shaker as it revolved around to her.

'There's a wee bit of plumbing downstairs needs urgent attention,' Rob gleamed straight at her.

'You broke the trance!' Julie shrieked at the redhead, startling her, the chopsticks becoming entangled in her fingers.

'Never was one, me love,' Rob winked broadly at Julie.

'Lady Day . . . ' Billy whispered serenely, the orchestra and voice in his head retreating, his eyes cheery, a feeling of pure joy whirling around inside him.

Rob drained his beer and signalled to the waiter for a refill. 'Jeez! They saw you coming—some guru gets his hands into your purse—next thing, you're playing Mandrake the bloody Magician with salt- and pepper-shakers! I love it!'

'What's so funny?' Julie caught Kate suppressing a giggle behind her hand.

Kate managed a cough. 'Prawn. Caught in my . . . ' She coughed again and thumped her chest, turning her head away from Julie to Billy. 'Are you okay . . . ?'

'Never felt better . . . ' Billy replied quietly. 'Not in my whole life.'

CHAPTER

7

'Give, buster. Your great hit ...?'

G Walking arm-in-arm from the Red Lantern, Billy and Kate headed back along King Street, the night subdued, like his mood of the last three-quarters of an hour or so, since Julie insisted on playing with the bloody salt-shaker and trying to make scrambled eggs of pure logic.

'Come on.' Kate was insistent.

There was no way Billy could get away with it. 'We made a record ...' he said, attempting to sound off-handed, hoping that would be the end of it. Mug.

'You and ...?'

'The ex,' there it was. Lou-*bloody*-ise popping her head up in his life for the second time today. Months go by—and not a dickybird. As if she hadn't existed. Then in one day! 'My song. Her hit. Muggins here,' Billy tapped his chest in a morse code manner, not realising the embitterment was off and running, 'padding out the middle eight.' He gestured a slide trombone

move. 'Best thing I ever wrote—she hijacks it.' He let out a long sigh, shoulders taking on a noticeable hunch. 'Story of my life—middle eights.'

'What is that supposed to mean?' The aggro was creeping into Kate's tone now.

'It's not important ...'

Kate stopped walking and retracted her arm. 'It is to me. Right now.'

Uh, uh. Billy was none too happy about the way the night was headed all of a sudden. The past, why couldn't it stay where it was? Stop getting in the way of things?

'Let's just drop it, okay?' Billy tried a macho edge. It got him nowhere—fast.

'No, I can't.' Kate faced him, standing firm. They had come to a halt under a mural—'I Have A Dream', a painting of the earth seen from outer space, all executed on a black-painted wall of a three-storey shopfront terrace.

'Look, Billy, you've got a lot tucked away inside you ... trouble is, you're hiding from what really matters. Sometimes ...' Kate paused, her exasperation building, ' ... sometimes, I feel like I'm banging my head against a brick wall trying to get it out. You know how I feel about you—and you might as well get used to it ... I love you, but, the fact is, Billy, I want a bit more from you than I'm getting ...'

Jeez! Was he getting stick today! Billy glanced over Kate's head at the painting of the earth, momentarily distracted by the swirls of

white cloud over oceans of blue and a dollop of purple indicating the Australian continental land mass. For an instant his head was light. He had the unworldly feeling of being up there, in space, gazing down onto the real thing. The bloody symphony orchestra playing the old familiar song again. Then it was gone. He was back, mentally, on the launching pad of reality.

'I was married—' he heard himself saying before he realised he was saying it, his mouth parched, '—she walked ... I've got this kid—*blames me*—though she'd never come out and actually say as much. *The hardware shop?* I stuck myself with that—we needed the security when the glow went off the music biz—for me, not the ex.' He took a deep breath. 'So, by doing the right thing for "the family", I got stuck in an S-bend—in a groove ... screwed to the wall and plugged into nowhere!'

'What else?'

What else? What does this woman want—*blood?*

'Oh, yeah—I happen to be steppin' out with this wonderful lady ...'

'Go on ...' Kate liked what she was hearing and she wasn't going to let him off the hook easily. Logically, the three magical words would follow: I love you ...

'I ... I ...' Billy stuttered, went quiet, then started singing, 'I had too much to love last time ...'

Kate fixed him with a look that stated

clearly, 'What kind of game you trying on, buster?'

'The big hit!' Billy said, singing on, 'It's not that I don't care about your love for me ...' He trailed off. 'You get the idea ...? The "big hit" ...?'

'I never heard it.'

'That's what kept us out of No. 1!'

Kate punched his arm playfully, settling for what she had managed to drag out of Billy in this one go, determined to have another the moment the opportunity arose. They walked on, Kate slipping her arm back through his.

Billy returned to familiar territory, his feet leading him back into Newman Street where his house nestled comfortably among other equally aged terraces and semis, all dating back to the early part of the century. A few yuppies had moved into the neighbourhood and already the changes were becoming obvious. New paint-work, upgrading of edifices that hadn't been touched in eons, gardens sprouting where weeds once challenged cracked concrete.

'Gentrification', that was the buzzword. Out with the old and good riddance to it, that's the way Billy saw it, buzzword or no. Served your time and purpose, now beat it!

And didn't Billy know that feeling?

Lolling along with his meandering thoughts, it slowly occurred to Billy that the

clouds looming overhead ... well ... they didn't look quite as he had come to expect night clouds to look. A silvery light seemed to be urging its way through. Taking his key ring from his jacket pocket, he paused in the middle of the street, turning on the spot, face raised to the sky, feeling light—the kind he remembered as a kid once when he was out in the country on a school trip, the air so crisp you could slice it with a knife like lettuce plucked fresh on morning dew—yes, felt that same light raining down on him in a mist.

His first thought was, 'I'm being abducted, that's it, a bunch of aliens are hovering just beyond the clouds and mugsy here is about to be snatched.'

But he wasn't. The light was gone as unexpectedly as it had appeared and he was left with only the dim street light shining along half-a-dozen houses and the key ring held tightly in his hand. He walked on, his face—if not his head—still in the clouds, stepping through the open gate and up the three steps to the porch to the front door of Appleby Mansions. He stifled a yawn and found the lock with the key.

Nothing.

He tried again. Still no luck. Thinking he had the wrong key, he stepped back into the light drifting down from the street lamp and held the key up to it. It was as crooked as—he had recently come to the conclusion—most men he had voted for with political aspirations.

Reluctantly, he returned to the front door and gave the button a push, preparing himself for Casey's tirade for being yanked out of bed at this late hour.

He waited for the upstairs landing light to come on. And waited. Not a glimmer. He gave the button another push. And waited. Still no luck.

Not home. Righto, was she in for a tongue-lashing when she did show!

Billy went around to the back of the house and tried to figure out how he could get himself up to the rear bathroom window, which was always open a smidgin, and inside. The outside plumbing secured to the red brick wall was of indeterminate age and he wasn't prepared to place his health and well-being completely on a successful ascent by that course.

Wheelbarrow! That's the go!

Another couple of minutes and Billy had the rusted wheelbarrow from the back of the yard (where it had been set in hard mud among other odds-and-sods that had made their way here from the shop in the name of Good Intentions To Get Things Done Around The Place) upright against the wall near the downpipe. Being careful with his footing on the wheel rigging of the barrow, he tested the strength of the downpipe. Satisfied he might have a chance, he pulled himself up to the top of the barrow and stood there for a long moment wondering where the music was coming from at this time of night.

Next door? Had to be, it was so close. Then it occurred to him—hold it a mo, it's the bloody symphony orchestra again—inside my head! This was getting very, very weird.

Trying to ignore the lush strings playing 'All Of Me', Billy searched around for a foothold on the wall above him, wondering how he might pull himself up to where he could stretch across to reach the bathroom window. He found what he was looking for—a horizontal pipe feeding out of the wall at the bathroom and connecting to the downpipe.

And still the orchestra played away, distant, soothing, not bothering him at all now.

Using the horizontal pipe for support and stretching himself as far as he could, Billy was able to get a hold on the bathroom window indent. From there it was a matter of getting a foothold on the ledge and pulling himself across, opening the window—and in like Flynn!

Then it happened again.

The clouds parted—just a smidgin in cloud terms—and *that light* hit him full on, almost throwing him off balance. The light *and* the music becoming louder in his head.

The next day, when he replayed the sequence of events over and over *and* over in his (still) befuddled head, Billy couldn't explain reasonably to himself how he had got from the bathroom window ledge to the roof—but he had somehow managed it, because that is where he found himself, hanging onto the

chimney for dear life, gazing up into a star-filled sky, the likes of which he had never seen in his life, being revealed to him beyond the parted clouds.

And through the stars, a shower of comets, wonderful to behold.

Billy was filled with the need to ride amongst the stars!

To catch a comet and soar to heights no one had ever dreamed of reaching!

Yes! Up there to that place where the music in his head was climbing!

'There is a Santa Claus!' Kristin, one of Casey's pals, shrieked, catching Casey, who was coming along Newman Street with Kristin, Alex and Melody, off guard.

'Thanks heaps,' Casey shot back at her harshly, keeping her voice low, knowing she was in for heaps from Billy once she got home. 'Why don't you wake up all of Newtown and be done with it?'

'Case . . . ' Melody tugged at her arm, seeing what had triggered Kristin's outburst. She pointed to the roof.

Casey, now seeing what Kristin and Melody had seen, joined Alex in discovering what it was that had so amused the two girls. Her heart sank—like all the way to China!

Billy was seated on the peak of the roof, gazing up at the star-filled sky.

How much time had passed since he had found his way to the roof, Billy himself, the next day, couldn't say. But there he was, singing along quietly to the symphony orchestra playing only for him. He knew that to be a fact. Knew it implicitly. How? Because a familiar voice inside his head—one he had heard almost every day of his life since he had first discovered her genius—*told him so*, that's how!

Below, Billy unaware of their presence, the two girls and Alex danced excitedly around Casey, making the most of her embarrassment, as only true friends will.

'Santa Claus! Santa Claus! Santa Claus!' they chimed, giggling and poking Casey until she was fit to scream. Finally, Alex, tiring of the jibe, broke his rhythm.

'C'mon, I'm goin' home,' he said, catching his breath and backing away.

Kristin and Melody, breathless, backed off to join him. 'Night, Case,' they chirped, throwing her wriggling-fingered waves, before turning and hurrying off after Alex, now anxious to get home. The girls' giggles floated on the night air, the final humiliation for Casey who simply wanted to curl up—right here on the footpath in front of her house—and pass away. They could pick her up with the recycling in a day or two and make her disappear. Yes, considering the options—the focus of *all* school jokes for the rest of the term *at least!*—that would be the cleanest exit all round.

'Billy!' she hissed at him through gritted teeth. No response. 'Billy!'

It began to dawn on Billy that another voice was trying to make itself heard. This one lacking the magic swimming around in his head.

'Billy!'

There it was again. Whoever it was, they must have been on first name terms with him, otherwise why would they be calling him Billy? It was so calm up here, why did someone have to come along and spoil it?

'Billy!'

And they were none too happy with him, it seemed.

Billy glanced down with a dazed expression at Casey, below him on the footpath, coming into view. He smiled serenely and threw her a little wave. Being on the roof, his body language was saying, was the most natural thing in the world.

BEING—UP—HERE—ON—THE—ROOF!

God in heaven! How in the world did he get up here? He couldn't stomach heights! He got vertigo just watching *Vertigo* on the telly!

'Case!' Billy's cry echoed in the night, his hands reaching for a lifehold that wasn't there.

'This is it!' It hit Billy with the impact of a bullet train. 'This is how it ends! Scraping you off the footpath with a spatula!'

CHAPTER

8

The neighbouring house lights being switched on ... windows being opened in anger ... the continuous wail that could only have been emanating from one source—*him!* Everything going on around No. 14 Newman Street receded into the ether. The following morning Billy recollected nothing of the previous night's chaos.

Not the gathering of neighbours on the street and footpath.

Not Casey's humiliation in front of everyone.

Not the chattering of 'experts' convinced they knew the best way to get Billy—clinging to the chimney where he had crawled, sweat dripping from every pore in his body—down from the roof.

Nor the fire engine that eventually arrived after Jo Smedley—the walking encyclopedia on the comings and goings of Newman Street going back to the Great Depression—strode from her

far end semi in her faded dressing-gown ready to kneecap the thoughtless mongrels who had disturbed her slumber, put her finger on the problem *and* the solution in a flash, strode back and put in the call. She then tried to get back to her kip while Billy was brought down from the roof like a hapless stray cat that had wandered too far up a tree.

Nor the applause from the neighbours once he had returned safely to ground zero only to have his knees give up on him. Luckily, the two hefty brigade men on either side of him had a hold of his arms and managed to lift him bodily inside, past Casey at the open door, whose whole life was running at top speed before her—from this night way through until she was as old as Jo Smedley and the different course it might have taken had the events of this night never happened! *The Newman Street Scandal would stain her for life!*

Now, soaping himself in the shower, Billy was sweetly oblivious to it all. Just him, the soothing warm water, his favourite frothy soap and a good exercise of the tonsils. Merrily, he sang 'All Of Me'—or thought he did.

The voice . . . ? It wasn't his. It was . . . well, very familiar. Yes, very un-him. Very . . .

Lady Day—Billie Holiday!

Out of the still-running shower in a shot, Billy stepped to the mirror over the washbasin and rubbed the steam away furiously. He faced himself, water running down his hair, face and

body, and opened his mouth to sing. Incredulously, the same voice arose around him. Pure, distinctive—one-in-a-billion!

FEMALE!

Knock-me-over-with-a-feather!

Talk about being hit in the rear end by a rainbow!

The mirror fogged up before Billy's disbelieving eyes. He gave it another rub. Gave the tonsils another try out. *Same result.*

What in the name of Hades was going on here?

Things like this didn't happen! You don't go to bed with the vocal range of Satchmo on Brasso and wake up blessed with the voice of ... *only the best there has ever been since Edison invented the gramophone!*

Least of all (if such a thing was an occurrence more common than Billy was cognisant of!) to William Constable Appleby.

Where—did—it—come from?

Yesterday?

Now ... what was it about yesterday that niggled away at him?

Let—me—think ... mmmmmmm ... yes, tickle—now why did 'tickle' ring a bell? Throat! Yep, that was it, he had a tickle in his throat. What else about yesterday? Yes—*Conroy*. Mighty Reg-bloody-Conroy Man. What did he have to do with Billy's current state of elation? Nought. That's what. So, what else happened? O'Hara's ... Red Lantern ... a stroll home with

Kate . . . not much out of the ordin . . .

Hold it a mo! Red Lantern? Why was the Chinese noshering ringing bells?

Billy screwed up his face, as he was prone to do when something needed to be thought through—but all the screwing and furrowing of brow and the scratching of the cranium and the rubbing of unshaven chin got him exactly nowhere. All he could recollect was the usual meal with the usual gang the way they had been eating there year in and year out for yonks.

OH—MY—GOD!

That was it! Had to be!

It was too, too horrible to contemplate!

With dread—and with both eyes squeezed tightly shut—Billy slowly lowered his head. He swallowed heavily, preparing himself for what he knew must be the answer, and, taking his time, tried to prompt one eye open.

It wouldn't budge!

And who could blame it? Who needs to be thrust face-to-face with the naked truth?

Open, you bugger!

Billy's one eye opened—and saw . . .

EUREKA! AND—YOU LITTLE, BLOODY BEAUTY, TO BOOT!

The family jewels were intact!

Billy let out a rush of relieved air, facing himself in the mirror. It still left him none the wiser. Where did it come from—if it was still there?

He tried another couple of lines, singing, the

same exceptional voice filling the bathroom, bouncing off the faded green tiles. Oh, yes, this was all his best Christmases and the best birthdays he could remember and the best times he had ever had all rolled up into one—a hundred, no!, make that a couple of thousand times over!

Dripping water in his wake, Billy hurried from the bathroom along the hallway to his bedroom, closing the door behind him. He went straight for the cassette player on his sideboard and the jumble of cassettes next to it looking like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The tower crumpled at his touch, cassettes dropping everywhere, around the player, along the sideboard and onto the floor. Hands all thumbs, he searched feverishly for one particular cassette.

Slow down! Okay, okay—that's what he did, the elusive cassette finally unearthed—*The Best of Billie's Blues*. The cassette in the player was ejected and Billie inserted. Fast forwarding, he stopped, checked—wrong track—went on, stopped again, checked—still the wrong one—went on, stopped, checked—had it! Billie's rendition of 'All Of Me' filled the room. Billy nodded his way in on the song, then started singing along with Billie. Their voices could have been as one.

Wait until Casey heard this.

Hurrying down the stairs, tying his dressing-gown hurriedly, Billy swung around to the short

hallway leading to the kitchen—and stopped. The familiar, irritating Mighty Man jingle was coming from the television on the sideboard in the kitchen-dining area.

Billy gathered himself; he wasn't going to let anything—especially the spectre of Mighty Reg-bloody . . . *anything*—put a dampener on his day. How was he going to play this?

Step into the kitchen singing 'All Of Me'?

That's it. Let her know straight up what her old man had discovered.

No—could be too much for her. Maybe it'd be best if he played it down.

Casey, scooping cornflakes from a bowl held just below her chin, was engrossed in the Mighty Man commercial on the telly, peering over the top of her specs propped halfway down her petite nose.

'Ah . . . Case . . . ' Billy peered furtively around the corner of the doorway, anxious, speaking in an unnatural, chin-pressed-to-the-neck bass voice.

Casey stopped eating, took a drink of orange juice and continued watching the commercial—Mighty Man flogging a super saver discount special the like of which had not been seen for at least a century.

'Ah . . . Case . . . ' Billy stepped into the kitchen, keeping his chin pressed to his neck in a forced attempt at nonchalance. There was only one way he was going to get her attention. He switched off the telly.

'I was watching that!

Billy cleared his throat, keeping up the nonchalant air, 'Ah ... Case ...'

'They want hardware—they know where to come!' She went to the sink with her empty bowl, voice and manner reflecting Billy in his time-worn mode of defence for staying true in his hardware shop to the business practices of Dickens and his times. 'Sure, if they want some gizmo to fix a Model T Ford.'

'Ah—Case,' the nonchalance disappeared, replaced with the stomach-sinking desperation that one stranger has when trying to communicate with another after living together for sixteen years under the same roof.

Busying herself, Casey seemed to be doing everything at once, returning the cornflakes pack to the cupboard, the juice container to the fridge. 'The shop's done okay by us!' She paused, hand on the open fridge door, facing Billy for the first time this morning. The knife in, she now gave it a good twist: 'Yeah—it's always puzzled me—how Mum could leave all this ...' She waved a hand sourly around the kitchen then reached in the fridge for her lunch box already packed with sandwich, juice and fruit.

Billy tried another tack, gesticulating, trying to convey his frustration at not announcing his startling news without giving the game away by talking.

'You'll do *anything* to embarrass me, won't you.'

She was cold this morning. Arctic cold.

'How I can ever show my face at school or out in the street again after last night ...' She sent another scathing look across the room, dripping with icicles. 'I wanted to lie down on the footpath and die! *What on earth were you doing up on the roof anyway?*'

For a moment, it was no longer Casey standing across the room from Billy, but Louise. 'What on earth were you thinking—buying a hardware store? *A hardware store! I'm an artiste—not a shop assistant!* I have a *reputation* to uphold! My fans expect to look up to me! I make their ordinary lives bearable, if only for an hour! How can you expect me to shatter their dreams by being seen behind the counter of a ... *hardware store?*'

Billy scrunched his eyes. He had to make Louise go away! Make Casey come back—foul mood and all. Anything was preferable to the spectre of The Singer from Hades. Had it been the apparition of a vampire before him, he could easily have fallen back on the old standby ... the sign of the cross ... cloves of garlic—but this being Louise, nothing short of a Scud missile (and even then he had his doubts) would do the job.

'You're always bottling it up inside,' Casey/Louise faced him. 'Why don't you just come out and say what's on your mind for once?'

Billy's hands and arms lost their momentum, going limp at his sides, his shoulders

drooping. Silence loomed between them. With a sad shake of the head—the kind someone might give over an injured animal, knowing the only humanitarian thing to do was put it out of its misery, she walked past him to leave. Something tugged at her. She let out a sigh in the doorway and stepped back to him.

‘Get to a doctor. You sound like death.’

Casey gave him a perfunctory peck on the cheek and then she was gone.

Billy slumped against the sideboard, deflated. Reality, as it always had a knack of doing, had pulled the rug out from under him with great force, tossing him up in the air only to land flat on his backside at the foot of one indisputable fact—Casey was no longer a kid and whatever planet she lived on now (God! don’t let it be Planet Louise! Anything but Planet Louise!), it did not revolve, even remotely, within his universe.

Thoughts rambling on open plains darkened by enormous, rolling thunderclouds pierced with sheets of lightning, Billy started humming ‘All Of Me’, The Voice creeping through again. In a wink of an eye, the sun was breaking through and he remembered what it was that had brought him downstairs hurriedly in the first place.

Now, here was something very tangible he had to come to terms with, this voice that, already, felt a completely natural part of his being. Where it had come from was no longer

the overriding question. What he was going to do with it, if it was more than just a passing thing, a freak of nature, equivalent to, say, a twenty-four-hour bug, *was*.

CHAPTER

9

Twist and Shout, the cluttered shop of musical paraphernalia Mack and Jack had relied upon for their livelihood for the past seven years, stood on the corner of a busy intersection one block back from King Street. Traffic squeezed over the narrow railway bridge up to the traffic lights from dawn's first light until well after seven o'clock each night. Given the four nights a week the pair played in Billy's band at O'Hara's, they really only enjoyed three nights of peace and quiet in their lives. Noise was second nature to the odd duo who had found in each other common genes that had, somehow, surmounted the barrier of colour and race.

There were those Newtown Regulars who assumed on occasion that the pair had—each without the other knowing—been born of the same mother. It was the only logical explanation for personality traits, mannerisms and the instinctive nature of common blood so dominant in the boys. Add to that the matching,

swept-back dreadlocks, the roomy street grunge clothes and a shared sense that there were many things in the heavens that they were attuned to and not letting on about.

A mutual love of jazz had brought the two together—Billy the catalyst when he went searching for musos after what he referred to as his 'dry spell' (the nearly five years following Louise's departure) to put together a band for O'Hara's. Billy liked their youth and their enthusiasm for a genre of music he was convinced the generation barking at his heels had delegated to the scrap heap. The first time Mack and Jack played together, a cheeky Dave Brubeck tune, Billy felt a charge, a rush, the like of which he had thought was way past him. If he had not known otherwise, he would have sworn the kids had been playing together for yonks.

Few people are fortunate enough to live and breathe their passion day in and day out, and if Mack and Jack had stopped to contemplate their lot in life they would probably have recognised that they were on a good thing. Music, in every form—instruments, old 78s, 45s, vinyl LPs, CDs, cassettes, 8-track cartridges, sheet music, photographs, biographies, playbills, posters, you name it, if it had any connection whatsoever with the act of musical performance it could be found at Twist and Shout. Or the proprietors had some clue where they could lay their hands on the required item.

Given the breadth of their knowledge in all

things musical, Mack and Jack—had they been quizzed before Billy hurried into Twist and Shout just as they were opening for business for the day—would, in all humility, have declared themselves champs. Of the world!

No, 'hurried' was not the way in which Billy entered. It was more . . . an act of a man with his eye firmly set on a destination taking a moment out just to reconfirm his travel details. He was flustered, dank hair still drying and, although never a prince of good taste in the 'sar-torial splendour' department, this morning his odd selection of shirt, trousers, jacket and, especially, one black and one brown shoe and mismatching socks was the declaration of a man to whom nothing else mattered but the desire to get under way.

'Morning—,' Mack said cheerily, about to step back outside with a sandwich board for the footpath.

'—Billy,' Jack added, one eyebrow raised to match Mack's arched likewise, both struck immediately by Billy's odd appearance.

Billy went to reply, but caught himself short, offering them a curt wave instead.

'What is it—'

'—Billy? You look—'

'—like you're gonna—'

'—burst a—'

'—gasket . . .'

Put your fingers right on it, boys! A gasket *was* threatening to burst inside of him! There was

only one way to play this. They had to hear him—er, her! *Cold!* No embellishment. Come on, you drongo, *get your act together!*

Mack and Jack shared the same thought. Billy was playing a game with them. That must be it. Still, there were things that had to be done. Mack turned to the open doorway with the sandwich board. Jack stepped to the light switch.

Billy opened his mouth and out it came. Smoky, distinctive, touched with the beauty of sadness only a life gone off the rails and wrung into song could etch.

Mack's first reaction was to look at the old wind-up gramophone. The needle arm must have jumped onto a 78. Jack glanced at the sound system; he must have left it running stillo when they switched off the electrics last night.

The gramophone was still. The sound system turned off . . . and Billie Holiday continued to sing 'All Of Me'.

In one of those delayed responses akin to the motion in a film when it was slowed a few frames, Mack and Jack turned from checking the respective equipment to Billy, standing before them, singing in the beautiful familiar voice, then, in a further delayed response, faced each other as the realisation impacted on them.

'Bloody—'

'—hell!'

Billy grinned as they faced him again, nodding sagely.

It's a—
—trick . . .

He must have—' Mack glanced at Jack.

—a hidden—' Jack's fingers wiggled
cratically.

—watchamacallit?

'Yeah walkman . . . ?'

Billy lifted his jacket, showing them there
were no tricks involved and turned on the spot,
singing.

'What—'

'—happened?'

Billy shrugged expansively. 'Beats me.
Whatever it was—it happened. To me!'

'Your voice, it's—'

'—no different when—'

'—you speak . . .'

They were right. It wasn't. And he wasn't
forcing himself to talk any differently, the way
he had with Casey.

'It's not, is it?' Billy tugged at his Adam's
apple, feeling the subtle movement. 'Don't that
beat all? But when I do this . . . ' he sang again,
Billie's voice flowing out of his conversational
normal voice—and stopped, ' . . . you hear? That
happens!'

Mack gestured with a finger to 'hold that
thought', and stepped behind the cluttered
counter to the sound system. He pressed the
button for power with one finger while his other
hand went to the selection of CDs, dozens of
them, in a cabinet secured to the wall. In a few

moments he had the Billie Holiday collection CD in the system and had found 'All Of Me'. The track swept through the shop from the overhead speakers.

Jack gestured to Billy—You're on!—and he sang along with Billie the way he had done earlier in his bedroom. The boys were filled with an other-worldly sense of standing in the presence of . . . *greatness*.

It made absolutely no sense at all!

It was crazy! Okay, wonderful, but . . . *crazy* nonetheless!

If they weren't hearing it with their own ears and witnessing Billy actually performing—and Billy hadn't been the chum he was but had simply been some nutter come in off the street—they wouldn't have been prepared to swear right then and there on a stack of Bibles . . . this was some kind of sweet miracle.

Lady Day was back. If only in voice . . .

Billy's day passed in a haze.

He left Mack and Jack to ponder over life's little twists and turns—both 'crossing their hearts and hoping to die' if even a breath of what had been revealed to them passed their lips until Billy had made up his mind how he was going to announce his new, blessed talent to all and sundry—and wandered in and around the shaded streets of Newtown, seeking thoughtful refuge in all that was familiar.

Tree-shaded streets; a park bench that carried carved initials put there when he was knee-high to a grasshopper; the sprawling churchyard and cemetery, thick with yellowed grass, where he half expected enlightenment from on high; narrow back lanes and alleyways that formed a haphazard map over his years of growing up, going through the pain and heart-ache of coming to terms with responsibility and commitment, of chasing moonbeams and dreams as he tried to carve out a niche for himself in the music world.

Yep, Newtown had him pretty well stitched up. Overall, it wasn't a big place, a drop in the ol' CBD compared to other suburbs, but it flowed through his veins like a great ocean of discovery, embraced him with loving, caring arms, playing time-tricks with his memories, his senses of smell and touch. Newtown had moulded Billy in the way only a person who has been shaped by the substance of *place* can ever know.

An act of collusion, that is what it was, he decided absently as he made his way across his home turf. You don't set out to tie yourself to one place—or it to you. It kind of creeps up on you, bit-by-irritating-bit most of the time, until, one day . . . presto! There you are! Fifty plus and you've spent half a century in the one spot. Okay, a year spent away from the place here, a few months at a time there . . . but, you add the lot up and what does it come to, the time spent trying to convince yourself you're not Newtown

through-and-through? Six? Seven years? A bit more, bit less?

Billy found himself on a vacant block used for parking, before him the whole side wall of a three-storeyed terrace, completely covered in graffiti. The executioners of the work would, he knew, insist it was art. Billy knew better. As a kid, he and his mates carved names on park benches, tree trunks—now, whole buildings fell victim to social idleness.

‘Sure is a funny old world,’ he thought, sitting on the bumper of a car, gazing at the mish-mash of colours, strokes, slashes, circles and whatever-you’d-call-its filling almost every inch of the wall. ‘What is it they’re trying to say?’

Somewhere, a few blocks away, a clock chimed—one, two, three, four, five ... six? Billy looked at his watch. The day had slipped by him, of that he was conscious now. And he was none the wiser about this quirk of fate that had presented him with the voice of his idol.

‘What is it you’re trying to say?’ he heard himself ask out loud to no one in particular.

‘Excuse me?’ a woman’s voice replied.

Billy turned. A woman, dressed in business clothes, stood at the car door behind him with her keys.

‘Beg yours ... ?’ Billy said.

‘What ... ?’ She stared at him. ‘You spoke first.’

'Did I?'

'I heard you ask me clearly, "What is it you're trying to say?" But, I hadn't said anything ... Then I said, "Excuse me?"'

Billy's head was spinning with confusion. Who was this stupid person and why was she insisting on muddying already murky waters?

Not receiving a satisfactory reply, she waved her car keys at him. 'If you don't mind, you're sitting on the front of my car and I want to move.'

Billy glanced down. He was indeed sitting on the front of her car. He stood back, watching her insert the key ring into the lock, open the door and get in behind the wheel, not taking her eyes from him.

He knew that look too well. It was the way people looked at him all the time. Prejudging him. Setting in *their* own mind *his* place in the order of things. *His* little box. It may not have been their intention, yet the inference was always there. The woman backed away from him in the car, not taking her piercing eyes from him, with a look that said: *No-hoper*.

'Well, that just shows you how much you know,' Billy said out loud. In that instant, he came to the conclusion that he had spent the whole, wandering day seeking: 'No one's going to look at Billy Apples that way, ever again!'

He strolled off, across the car park, singing quietly to himself.

Oh, this was just too marvellous for words. It was like having his own private *Best Of Billie Holiday* record collection in his head, able to make his selection in the blink of an eye.

CHAPTER

10

Great speeches never delivered:
Napoleon's victory over Wellington at Waterloo.

Custer's conquest of Sitting Bull at Little Big Horn.

The mayor of New York's welcome upon the *Titanic's* completion of her maiden voyage.

And—

'I'm good value, Billy. Bloody good value. I've got my head screwed on and I haven't got stars in my eyes about romance and all the trimmings (but that doesn't discount a rose now and then—a whole bunch would be even better); I'll leave that to Julie and the best of British to her. She needs it if she keeps on the way she's going—trying to graft pieces of other people's ideas of who and what they are onto hers.'

Kate spent a restless night working out the finer details of this beauty.

'I deserve better from you than I'm getting. But, I've got patience—and plenty of it. That's

one of my qualities. Most people aren't as lucky as we are. They spend their whole lives searching for their soulmates—even when they might not be aware they are doing it—and most come up empty-handed. So . . . I'm in this for the long haul, Billy. I just want you to know that. I also want you to know, I expect some changes on your side of the fence.'

It wasn't bad. To the point—without forcing him into a corner.

The previous evening, learning about his hit record with Louise, had been the last straw in a hand of various lengths she had been drawing from him since they had started 'stepping out', as he so sweetly put it.

Around two in the morning, Kate had allowed herself a warm-hearted smile, recalling the 'stepping out' part of their conversation on King Street. She had to be so careful in the way she handled him, he was too precious to lose. Where would you find a man today who could still think of courtship—or whatever the glossies called it—in a quaint, old-fashioned way?

Was that what she was pining for?

The unattainable?

To be swept up in the romance of other times?

When, according to what her mum had told her of the way Kate's dad-to-be had romanced her at Saturday night dances, Sunday picnics, moonlit strolls, balmy evenings on the front porch with soft music playing on the radio

inside, a man and a woman had got to *really* know each other before making the commitment that inexorably dictated the rest of their lives.

Kate had tried to emulate her mum's experience with Dad from the first serious stirrings of interest in men—or, to be exact, boys taken to wearing long trousers and aftershave, smoking cigarettes and generally conducting themselves in a way that announced to the world: Hey! No way am I a kid! I'm a man!

A couple of them nearly convinced her, too. Until they opened their mouths and the kid still there inside jumped out, killing any further chance they had of pulling off the ruse.

'No, young lady,' Kate had told herself in the night, 'those days of living with your romantic head in all those fluffy clouds are long gone. You won't see forty again and you feel things now with Billy you haven't felt before, not with the two failed engagements, marriage to Len for sixteen years (until you both hit the brick wall of disinterest and outright boredom with each other), or the couple of wayward blokes who crossed your path after the divorce.'

With that final declaration, Kate had tucked her speech away in the corner of her mind and willed herself off to sleep, only to go through the next day with it unspoken.

Billy had not come to work.

'Billy taking a sickie?' Julie piped up just after ten o'clock that morning, returning with two cappuccinos.

Ill-tempered, Kate, already well into her first shampoo, colour and style of the day, glanced at Julie as she placed one of the cappuccinos down next to her.

'He's not open.'

'He was fine when he left me last night,' Kate said, concentrating on the tint. The woman had hair like string. God in heaven knew what kind of muck she had used on herself over the years!

Julie shrugged. 'Maybe he's just taking a . . . you know . . .'

'Sickie, yeah, you already said that.' Kate couldn't hide her irritation. She had the speech ready for her lunchbreak when she had planned to face Billy and make him understand exactly where she stood in the scheme of things.

A sickie, though, didn't make sense. She had seen him in that shop when he had a temperature running at boiling point. Like herself, if you didn't open up, then you didn't pay the rent—and if you didn't pay the rent, the chances of opening up lessened greatly. People like them could no longer rely on friendly bank managers to get them through rough patches. Banks wanted to know you *if you had money* they could, by means always legal but often morally suspect, credit across from your pocket into theirs.

Her hands immersed in the Medusa hair of her first customer, Kate had done her best to put Billy's whereabouts aside and it wasn't until around lunchtime, when she heard mention of a

sighting of Billy—wandering across the cemetery in the church—that her concerns returned. Later, they deepened. Anna popped in from her flower shop to freshen the arrangement always kept on the counter of the New Moon.

‘That was a funny business at Billy’s place last night,’ she said with an enigmatic slant of the head as she fussed with the flowers.

‘What “funny business” would that be, Anna?’ Kate asked, going to the cash register to pay for the flowers.

‘On the roof? Fire engines?’ Anna replied, hands signifying a great commotion. ‘One of Billy’s neighbours—he was in my shop just now ... his wedding anniversary ...’

‘He must have been pulling your leg,’ Kate grinned. ‘Why would Billy be on the roof?’ She glanced around nervously, thankful Julie was not in sight. She must have been out the back, in the bathroom.

‘I think not the pulling of the leg,’ Anna said. ‘He’s not the joker, this neighbour. He’s the serious bloke, you know. And, where is he today, eh, Billy? I haven’t seen hair nor hide of him.’

‘He’s around ...’ Kate stated off handedly. ‘Nothing to worry about.’ She was suddenly anxious for Anna to be gone. Julie stepped around the rear wall divider between the shop, back storage room and bathroom, seeing Anna and throwing her an itsy-bitsy wave.

Sure! *He’s around*—wandering through graveyards! Nothing to worry about? Climbing

up onto the roof! Having to be carted down by firemen! Any minute now, I expect to look out the window and see him riding by on the top of a bus, waving at her! Sid at the wheel!

Now, here it was, time to shut up shop, and not a sign of him the whole day. By mid-afternoon Kate had thought of ducking out and catching Casey as she left school, then just as quickly dropped the idea. What if Casey knew of some . . . *disorder* with Billy? What if she was covering for him? How would she handle Kate stumbling across the problem? Would she cover for him?

Julie's day had been torn between her work and *knowing* something was amiss between Kate and Billy.

'I know it's none of my bu . . . ' Julie had said casually at one point when they had a breather between appointments.

'I don't want to talk about him,' Kate chopped her off mid-word, and knowing only too well that Julie was never one to back off unless you really put your foot down, added curtly, '*I mean it!*'

'Billy needs work,' Julie insisted, stepping past Kate, busying herself at the mirror bench opposite the chairs. 'Serious work—that's if you expect to make something of this relationship.'

'He cares. I know he does. And, I said I didn't want to talk about it.'

Deep down, though, Julie knew she did want to discuss it. Everyone always wanted to

get their problems off their chest. And Billy was Problem No. 1 with a capital 'P' in neon lights. Why couldn't Kate see the light? Open her mind to kindred souls out there waiting to make contact?

Here they were, getting ready to finish for the day, and Julie was no further down the road in her quest to make Kate come to her senses. All the 'work' in the world was not going to turn Billy Appleby around. Make him the person Kate deserved.

O'Hara's on Friday nights was no different from O'Hara's on Thursday, or any other night of the week for that matter. Christmas aside, when the pubs closed for the day, the only day the place perked up was Melbourne Cup Day. Then it was on for young and old with no barriers between race, colour or creed. Shoulder to shoulder they stood—and for more than a few it was the only means of support, the difference between staying vertical or sliding to the horizontal underfoot—in for the booze, the grub and, most of all, the punt.

O'Hara prided herself on her Melbourne Cup specials, ordering up cases of the top snags, thrown onto the barbie set up at the back of the pub, served on rolls piled with fried onions and a relish, the secret of which would do honours to the web of secrecy surrounding Colonel Sanders's creation. The relish was a once-a-year

thing, celebrated across Newtown and into surrounding suburbs and taking on a mystique akin to urban myth. Each year, new faces would push their way into O'Hara's to either discover the exquisite taste or disprove its very existence.

Tonight, the relish was very much on O'Hara's mind. The Cup was two months away. Time to buy in the ingredients and get the recipe under way. On more occasions than she wanted to remember, the suggestion had been made that she make her speciality an all-year-round dish. Always, she waved the suggestion aside with a grunt of disinterest. Had she conceded, O'Hara's would undoubtedly reap the benefits—that was the upside, when she gazed around at the handful of Newtown Regulars she faced night after night.

The downside?

The clink, for certain.

Up the river!

The cell door slammed behind her and the key thrown into Sydney Harbour!

Porridge!

Whatever the Colonel used as the base for *his* secret recipe, O'Hara knew it could never even hint at the *smidgin* of illegal substance vital to her relish—*Not intentionally. No, your Honour!* It happened purely by accident. When she had whipped up that first batch, back when ABBA were blitzing the country, Ted, the bass player who had wheedled his devious way into her favour after a gig at the pub with his glitter band,

was prone to the devil weed and had taken it upon himself to plant a few seeds in with her basil and sage. Without her realising what he had done she would swear to that on her life!

One thing led to another and a couple of leaves of Ted's weed found their way into the pot along with the garlic and mustard and dozen or so other delicacies. The punters couldn't get enough of O'Hara's relish that first Cup Day she ran at the watering hole. Ted, as high as a kite before lunch from gutsing down six snag rolls while he got the barby going, was familiar enough with the impact the relish made upon him to twig to the source of 'the hit' he was getting. O'Hara was catatonic for days when told. She had, inadvertently, become *a drug dealer!*

Ted had gone the way of the other men in her life. The recipe had lingered on, one of the few things of any worth a man had left her with. The 'secret ingredient' reduced to minuscule proportions, just enough to give an annual lift to the jaded souls in need of a bit of 'rejuvenation', as O'Hara liked to think of it.

Gazing solemnly around the bar, she could see that tonight would not be different to any other Friday night.

Ed, the narcoleptic, was well away at one end of the long bar, beer in hand, chest rising and falling quietly as he dozed. A volcano could erupt next to him and it would have no effect. Ed would gently snooze on, waking only when

his body clock—cursed with some cockeyed gene—told him to wake, the beer going to his mouth as if all in continuous motion. Twenty minutes could pass between picking up the beer and taking a drink. Black holes in his days making Swiss cheese of his life. O'Hara sometimes wondered if there was another, deeper plane of narcoleptic sleep he dropped onto when he got around to the legitimate act of sleeping at night, in bed.

Next to him, Ronnie, flash as a rat's gold tooth in business suit, buttondown collar and tie, had his head in the *Financial Review*, a glass of white wine at his elbow, a couple of thousand miles and forty thousand years away from the ways of his tribal ancestors. Ronnie was always good for a tip on the stock market, but this wasn't the environment to be dropping money-making tips.

'Sal the Gal', a whole lot of womanhood straining at jeans a size too small for her muscular arms—tattooed 'I'M HERS!', bare outside the sleeveless T-shirt and leather waistcoat, baseball hat with the peak turned backwards—squatted on a high stool. Her stylish, leather-dressed girlfriend (a face that had graced the cover of every woman's beauty and fashion magazine in the country) was seated across from her. The pair had eyes only for each other.

The punks at the bar were as scarred as the bar itself. They drank the cheapest plonk O'Hara's had, poured straight from flagons into

their glasses, the spillover gathering around the glass base, to be dabbed at by the punks and the drops licked from fingers—O'Hara dreaded to think where they had been.

Other bar stools and tables were taken at various spots around the room by singles, couples, trios, all to whom O'Hara's was a refuge of sorts. From what exactly in each life O'Hara discovered only as tidbits of worries, woes and aspirations unfulfilled that were divulged over the years of their custom.

On the stage, Mack and Jack toyed with drums and bass. Something in their manner was out of kilter tonight. O'Hara could not put her finger on what it was. There was an ... *anticipation* about them. Was that the word? Nah, what was there to 'anticipate' in this place? The next government hike in taxes on booze, perhaps. From experience, O'Hara knew for a fact this mob never anticipated that far ahead. Payday, dole day, pension day, single mum's day, take-your-choice-government-handout-day—that was *anticipation*!

Sid was seated on the edge of the raised stage, morosely cleaning his trumpet with a cloth, gently rubbing back and forth, back and forth, his actions suggesting to O'Hara he was moving a great weight back and forth inside his head. She was prepared to bet a bundle it began with a 'J', and she was sitting an empty table away, being schmoozed by Neil, a new face on the local footy team. Muscles for brains, a nose

that had been rearranged a few times, a flat-top you could land a fighter jet on. Julie hung on his every word, one hand fiddling with a crystal hanging around her neck on a silver chain.

Rob sat at the bar, chatting to the new face, the redhead he had left with last night. 'Mr Libido' was *on*. How long would this one last? A week? Ten days? What was she thinking? Ten days! That would be tantamount to an engagement in Rob's love-life. Not that 'love' ever entered into it, from what O'Hara had observed.

'Par for the course round here tonight, girly,' O'Hara told herself, lifting her sore elbows from the bar where she had been propping her head, both fists dug into her cheeks, perusing her little slice of humanity for what it was worth. 'On your bike—get the wheels of industry rolling!'

She left the bar, not noticing Billy pausing in the doorway, holding the door partly open, a man about to make an entrance. That very demeanour should have set her antennae buzzing.

Billy didn't make 'entrances'. It wasn't in his make-up.

He turned up.

Played.

Drank a few beers.

Had a bit of a chinwag with Ronnie or Ed (when he wasn't dozing midbeer) or other regulars and left. More often than not these days with Kate and Julie and the band for after-gig munchies. The only change to his public

schedule was to put his hand out to O'Hara on Sunday nights for the band's pay.

'Well . . . this is it,' Billy prompted himself, perusing the room. Almost exactly as he had left the place last night. Amazing. The bar could have been a film set, everyone seated or standing where they were told to for the sake of continuity. Even their drinks seemed to Billy to be where they had stood or were held last night.

'Hey!' the thought struck him, 'maybe this is still last night? Today hasn't happened at all? Yes, that's it! I'm not arriving—I'm actually on my way out of the door and I've had this flash where I had Billie Holiday's voice and . . .'

'Evenin'.' Des, gut protruding over his slacks, ever-present roll-your-own stuck to his bottom lip, passed Billy on the way to the Gents.

Billy scrunched his eyes tight, opened them, gave his head a shake. Nope, this was tonight all right, not last night. For some reason, he distinctly remembered that Des had on a bright orange shirt, not the blue-and-white striped one he was wearing tonight.

He walked into the bar and along it, Rob not taking any notice of him as he passed and Sid too wrapped up in the hopelessness of his romantic aspirations to care if he never blew another note. Mack, at his drums, was having a problem with a nut on the cymbals. Jack tightened strings on his bass, one ear primed to their sound as he plucked each in turn. Both boys faced Billy stepping onto the stage. The three

shared a conspiring look, Mack and Jack staying with Billy now as he sat at the piano and gently found the opening bars to 'Am I Blue'. The boys glanced at Sid, Rob and the Regulars; nothing.

Not a murmur of attention or interest.

Billy mentally distanced himself from his surroundings. It was the only way he was going to get there with this thing.

He was no longer in O'Hara's. He was on the East Side of New York, in a blues joint thick with smoke and anticipation. Faces, black and white alike, gazing at him from behind black specs, each one silently letting him know he was among friends, willing him to 'do his thing'.

'I'm doing it! I'm doing it!' he shouted silently inside his head.

'No you're not! All you're doing is playing the bloody ivories!' this other silent voice shouted back at him. 'If you're gonna do it—*do it!*'

Billy forced himself to open his mouth. And sing.

Like he had never sung before in his life.

Keeping that East Side joint squarely in mind, the faces behind the specs mellowing, heads nodding in time with the melody, his magic easing its way into their heads, their blood, their souls.

Sid, replacing the mouthpiece in his trumpet, wondered why someone had put on a Billie Holiday record.

Rob, in mid-flight about the joys to be

discovered riding buck-naked on a Harley along a stretch of empty beach under a full moon, could have done without someone dropping a buck into the jukebox.

'Hold on,' he interrupted himself, 'this dump doesn't have a jukebox.'

'Beg yours ... ?' the redhead asked. She had only been half-listening. 'Moonlight', 'naked as God intended' and something about a Honda on an empty beach ... and now 'jukebox'?

Rob motioned her to be quiet, his head turning slowly around to the hunched figure at the piano. The fact that it was Billy took a few moments to sink in. Glancing at Sid, slowly standing from the side of the stage, Rob saw that he too had connected with Billy's performance—if it was, indeed, Billy? It certainly looked like him ... but sound like him? Not in a zillion years! Rob looked past Sid, to Mack and Jack, beatific in their reaction to this, well ... *strange occurrence*.

Sensing they were being studied, the twins presented Rob with a shared look that said, 'Yep, this is really happening!' and returned to Billy.

Rob, leaving his chair, stood between it and the stage, gradually tearing himself away from Billy and taking in the Newtown Regulars, each drawn out of whatever private closet they stepped into whenever they sought out the refuge of O'Hara's. For the first time, Rob realised they were not urban zombies at all. They did draw breath! They could be induced to respond

through a whole range of human emotions verging on normality!

Kate appeared in the entrance, wiping rain from herself, her hands coming to a halt as it dawned on her that she had walked into the wrong place. She couldn't think how, but she had mistaken the exterior of this place for O'Hara's. About to turn and exit, she stopped as O'Hara emerged from the back room.

She *was* in the right place!

How could this be? People were smiling—*beaming*—there was movement, bodies swaying in time to this pure, beautiful music coming from . . .

Kate moved further into the bar, O'Hara walking slowly towards her at a right angle, both women drawn to the same place—the band area in the far corner—to a familiar figure, but in an unfamiliar place, at the piano.

Billy? Playing? Yes . . . but the voice . . . ? So recognisable . . . ?

Kate broke the spell. *A trick!* Right! The boys were playing a trick!

In a liquid motion, Billy raised a finger to Rob who stepped up onto the stage and took Billy's place at the piano as Billy moved away to the microphone. On the same beat, Sid raised his trumpet and started to blow. Mack brought the drums in with his fancy brushstrokes. Jack plucked mournfully on his bass.

Kate swallowed her mistake; no trick this, her own eyes convincing her of that fact while

Billy continued singing, his features calm, his manner very confident, conveying a clear message of a man in tune with himself. She had never, in the few months since she had first known him, then loved him, seen Billy make this statement about himself.

'Hold on,' Kate pulled herself up as the song came to a close, '*he's not himself!* He can't be. Not with that *voice* ...' Before she could follow this through, she found herself clapping along with everyone else. A huge lump crept up into her throat, her eyes moistened.

'Wh-what ... happened ...?' Sid, trumpet still raised, felt himself coming out of a trance.

'You just tore their fooking hearts out's what happened.' Rob, hands on his hips, surveyed the applauding, cheering, whistling, stomping people the way he looked over a complicated plumbing job well done. He turned back to Sid and Billy, gesturing cheekily to Billy. 'I think he's been taking hormone injections ...'

Sid's brows furrowed. 'Everything's ...' he cleared his throat awkwardly, '... you know ...? Okay, I mean ...?' he leaned closer to Billy, '... down there ...?'

Billy wasn't listening. He felt himself being drawn into Kate's eyes, tears welling there—not of unhappiness, but of sheer joy.

There was one hell of a commotion going on in the bar, Billy thought, but why does it feel like there's only the two of us? He and Kate?

CHAPTER

11

'What happened ... ?'
'Tonight ... ?'

Rain fell on the corrugated roof of Kate's house just above the bedroom where she lay with Billy.

'I'm not too sure ...' Billy went on, '... it's been a funny kinda twenty-four hours ...' He grinned. 'But it wasn't bad, was it?'

Kate was contemplative, running things over in her mind.

'It's as if ...' she started, then stopped.

'As if ... ?' Billy prompted.

'... someone else was, you know ...'

Billy was exasperated. He hated it when she did this. Stopped. Started. Had to be prompted.

'No, I don't know.'

'As if ... inside you—doing all the singing ...'

'It felt like me.'

'Well, it certainly didn't sound like you.'

She craned her head from his bare chest where it had lain. 'Not at all like you ...'

'What are you looking at?'

'You ...'

'Me?'

'I don't mean "you" you ... I mean ... you ...'

'That's as clear as mud.'

Billy moved to get out of bed. Kate stopped him, her hand gently on his arm.

'Not yet.'

'I've got to get back.' He sat up, bare feet on the floor. The rain came down harder. He was going to get soaked.

'I know—Casey ...' Kate sat up, pulling the sheet up around herself. She studied him while he dressed. 'You were different tonight ...'

Billy stopped dressing. 'I felt different ... like I was ...' he mused, and sat back on the side of the bed, liking the idea, ' ... somebody ...' It was said softly, almost as if he was daring himself to say it.

'Billy—*be somebody!*' Reg Conroy's challenge came back at him.

'You are somebody,' Kate said. 'To me.' She moved across the bed to him, placing her arm around his neck, laying her head on one shoulder.

'No, I mean, to *everybody*.' He was quietly excited. 'You saw their faces, heard the applause. Me'n the boys've been playing O'Hara's since the dawn of time, it seems, and I've never seen

them the way they were tonight ...'

'Maybe you've found something—in here ...' She brought her other hand around to his heart and laid it there. 'Something you never knew you had ...?'

Billy gazed down at her hand on his heart. He liked the feel of it there. It felt ... right. He moved his head slightly to meet her lips.

'Whatever it is,' Kate breathed the words to his face, 'I hope it's not a passing thing. You *were* different tonight ...' They were about to kiss when Kate stopped. 'Maybe ... it's been there all the time. Only ...'

Billy silenced her with his lips.

Rain fell monotonously on the windshield of a stationary car parked a few doors along from the Appleby house in Newman Street. From inside, four dim, red glowing dots rose and fell behind a cloud of smoke seeping from the top of the sparingly open windows.

Alex had swung the use of his big brother's car for the night. Not that it was any great adventure he, Casey, Kristin and Melody had been out on. Alex lived four blocks away, on the other side of the railway line from the city, which led on through the inner city suburbs, into the western districts, the mountains and on into vast open country. Places Alex would have loved to have had the courage to just zoom off to in his brother's jalopy. A week or two on the

open road—what a blast and a halt that would be eh?

'Aaah, give it a rest, X,' Kristin said, taking a drag on the cigarette. 'This set of spokes wouldn't get you past Penrith.'

'Past the top of the street's more like it,' Casey piped up, waving smoke away. This smoking gig was starting to get hazardous to her health. Her eyes smarted and the back of her throat felt like she had been eating pineapple skins for a week.

Kristin and Melody laughed. More a cackle. They still had some years to go before their response to humour matured into 'laughter'. Their view on life came down on the side of 'derisive' and in that they were no different from a million or two other kids coming up through the ranks of life. Anyone over the age of eighteen—twenty at the far, far outside—was The Enemy and was to be treated with absolute suspicion.

There were times when Casey found this attitude of her peers towards 'oldies' sort of heavy-handed. Then an incident arose, such as the one she had had to endure last night with her old man, and she had to come down on the side of common sense—yes, they were The Enemy, and they did these things to expose their children, younger relatives or whatever, to the humiliation of a thousand lashes.

Thankfully, Casey did have good friends. At school that day, despite word getting around

the schoolyard in *no seconds flat*, her mates had stood by her.

She was not to be laughed at.

Her dilemma—being stuck with an oldie who was likely to go off crackers at the drop of a hat—was a major disaster that could happen to any kid. To scoff at one of their own could bring down a Yin and Yang reaction on any one of them; don't ask for whom the bell tolls and all that stuff, *they knew*, right down to their school socks, was out there in the ether waiting in ambush for unsuspecting souls such as they.

Apart from the smoke inhalation, Casey had to admit, she felt good about herself tonight. She knew what good mates were.

Even as she was telling herself this, a ghost-like figure was coming into view towards the end of the street, through the rain-streaked front window—a heart-sinkingly, familiar figure hunched under an umbrella. Alex, next to her at the wheel, chattered away with Melody and Kristin who were planning a decent night out next time he could lay his hands on the wheels. A drive into the city for a cruise up William Street and into the Cross.

'Yeah!' Kristin punched the back of Casey's seat.

Alex wasn't so sure—okay, the city, but the Cross . . . ? His concerns faded from Casey's ears. There was a dreadful buzzing sound as Billy got closer. He was moving in a funny kind of way.

Not funny ha-ha either.

Funny peculiar!

Funny as in: *He's gonna do it to you again!*

Casey's hands moved slowly up her cheeks, headed to cover her eyes.

Billy was *dancing*—twirling the umbrella ... stomping along, one shoe in the gutter running wild with water, the other on the edge of the footpath!

Who did he think he was? Gene Kelly!

'I gotta go!' Casey fumbled with the door handle. She couldn't get out of the car fast enough.

'Hey, what's the ru—,' Kristin made a grab for Casey's shoulder as she moved to get out of the car. Suddenly, Kristin had a view through the front window of what it was Casey was so eager to escape from. 'Jeez, will ya look who it ain't! The Dirty Dancer himself!'

Alex and Melody slapped hands on the windows to clear the glass for a better look at what it was that was sending Kristin into sheets of laughter as she too started from the car.

'Roof too wet for you tonight, Mr Appleby?' Kristin shouted over the roof of the car, slapping it with one hand in time to her laughter.

Oblivious to the attention he was getting across the street, Billy swung the open umbrella high, stomping merrily along in the water, forcing great splashes up his already soaked trouser legs.

Tonight, he felt ... *remade!*

The rain? It was there just for him.

The world? *There for his taking!*
World? Hey, Apples—why think *small?*
The *universe!*

Completely engrossed in his fantasies, Billy wasn't prepared for the glug of leaves, all slippery and dangerous, that had built up on the gutter's downslope.

Kristin shrieked, seeing it coming, her cry spinning Casey around at the gate, the rain stopping at that very moment.

Billy's stride-stomping shoe slammed down through water onto the spot and the leaves slid underfoot.

'Aaaaaahhhhhh!', Billy yelled, momentarily in mid-flight, and, 'Sssshhhhhittt!' a split second before he hit the dam of water where it had congregated at a mess of plastic garbage bags in the gutter. Instead of finding his feet, Billy turned on his tummy and started to swim on the spot.

'You're drunk!' Casey shouted, feeling the tears about to burst.

Billy glanced around. Funny—what was Casey doing out here on his marathon swim from Sydney to Brisbane?

'This is a good place not to be!' Kristin jumped back in the car and slammed the door.

Alex needed no further prompting. He started the car, put it into gear and pulled away, Kristin leaning over Melody and winding the window down.

Billy was on his feet, water running down him from his head, like a tap. 'Coming home -

this hour's getting to be a bit of a habit, isn't it, young lady?

'Love your swimming pool, Mr Appleby!' Kristin cried at the window as the car drove away between Casey, on the footpath, and Billy in the gutter. He turned to have a go at them. A gaggle of laughter drifted back from the car driving off up the street.

'You're not drunk ...?' Casey said. This made it worse. Much worse. 'You'll do anything to embarrass me!'

'It's not my life's purpose, you know—making things tough on you ...' Billy strode across the road towards Casey, already at the front gate, wanting to get inside as fast as possible.

'No,' she swung on him, cheeks streaked with tears, 'it's just a hobby!'

'Hurting you's the last thing in the world I'd want to do,' Billy said, coming up to her, his shoes splashing. 'Okay, okay ... somewhere along the way, Case, I lost the tempo—you'n me ... after your mum took a walk out of our lives. I just felt ... angry. Always angry ...' He trailed off. Seeing the resentment in her face took the wind out of his sails.

'Go on ...' Casey felt her own anger ebbing. Billy remained silent. She took a couple of steps closer, wanting to close the gap between them. 'Please.'

'Last night ... I realised that was the mug's way of doing it,' he said on the tail of a big

breath. 'You're not a child anymore ...' He haltingly raised a hand to touch her face, his voice breaking. 'Where did she go ... that little girl of mine ... ?'

Casey wiped her damp cheeks with the back of her hand. 'I'm still here ... a bit bigger ... but the little girl things still hurt,' she said, the sun starting to come out across her horizon. 'Maybe 'cause they've got more space to rattle around in ... ?'

Billy felt a pang in his heart. He opened his arms and Casey stepped into them, hugging him in a way she had not hugged him for many years. They stood there, not moving. Spatters of rain started to fall on their heads.

'Let's go in, Dad ...' Casey broke the hug, taking his hand and turning back to the gate.

'What was that you just said ... ?'

Casey gave him a quizzical look. 'Let's go ...'

'No—the other bit ...' He so desperately wanted to hear the word again.

'Dad ... ?'

'That's the bit.' He beamed, silently mouthing the word. 'Sure, let's go in.'

CHAPTER

12

You're the king! Martin Riggs—a Lethal Weapon *and a half!* A Mighty Man!' Reg Conroy, at the wheel of his red Porsche, was in full flight. 'No one gets away from Reg Conroy! No-bod-y!'

Seeing a space outside the New Moon, he swung into it, Mr Grand Prix himself. Appleby Hardware was in the bag. Good as signed up. Reg's stars this morning had spelt W-I-N-N-E-R.

Priming himself at the wheel for his big entrance, preening himself in the rear-view mirror, Reg caught sight of Teng, cut-offs stained with paint, Hawaiian shirt flapping in the breeze, approaching Billy's open shop.

'Today, Billy,' Reg peeled off the lambskin driving gloves, rehearsing his opening spiel, 'is *the first day of the rest of your life.*'

He got out of the car, taking his briefcase with him from the front passenger seat, and saw Billy leaving his shop with an air of finality. Reg

paused, seeing Teng step up to Billy, now closing the shop.

'You coming or going?' Teng asked.

Billy pointed back the way Teng had come. Going, obviously.

Teng brought a list from his pocket. 'Ten days and the rellies lob on my doorstep from Hong Kong, Billy-matey. I still got two rooms to finish.'

Billy took Teng's hand, opened it and dropped the shop key into it. He gestured to the door, gave a mock salute and strolled off.

Reg was stunned. A loud horn-blast forced him into action, a truck driving straight towards him where he stood at the open door of the Porsche. Slamming it shut, Reg pressed himself against the car. The truck roared by, the driver giving him the finger. By the time Reg had pulled himself together Billy had disappeared into the foot traffic along the street. Teng was already inside the hardware store. And Reg was seriously considering taking legal action against the publisher of the morning paper over its astrological wisdom.

'I don't want to do this anymore!' Billy had heard himself saying this out loud only a few minutes earlier when he arrived to open up the shop for business. He had stood in the doorway facing the same array of hardware and building supplies he had been greeted with ever since he bought the place.

'You've done the "right" thing by Casey,'

he also heard himself advise, 'now it's time to do the right thing by yourself.'

Standing in that doorway, the S-bend ... the groove ... the wall he was screwed into ... and that great nowhere that had been threatening to consume him ... they all started to break apart then disintegrate before his eyes. There was no law writ in stone that stated: EACH AND EVERY DAY, BILLY APPLEBY, SIX DAYS A WEEK, FIFTY-TWO WEEKS IN THE YEAR, IT IS INCUMBENT UPON YOU TO TEND COUNTER AND MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL HARDWARE SUPPLY USERS DEPENDENT UPON YOUR GOOD OFFICE.

'You've got two perfectly good feet,' he heard himself saying, 'what do you think they're for? *Using chopsticks?*'

Next thing Billy knew, he was retreating from the doorway, closing the door behind him and locking it.

'Billy!' 'Sal the Gal' cheered him with the thrust of a victorious fist into the air from the doorway of a trash palace, her usual fashion shop of choice. 'Bonza gig last night! You've got a deadly set of tonsils goin' for ya!'

He acknowledged her with the glimmer of a smile and walked on.

'Billy!' O'Hara, both hands full of abundant greenery—fresh herbs— paused in mid-conversation with Bruno outside his fruit and veggie shop. 'Knocked my socks right off last night you did, you sly bugger! Where you been hiding that voice?'

He replied with an easy shrug, threw her a wave and continued on. His feet were made for *walking*, that's what they were for! Taking him places he had never been before and he wouldn't get there if he stopped and chewed the fat with this lot.

As a veteran of fifteen years behind the wheel of Sydney buses, Sid had seen and heard most things expected of humanity pressed up against itself in this social hotpot of cultures and races. Unlike taxi drivers, he was not privy to the intimacy of his passengers' lives poured out in snatches of frustration or celebration over brief journeys. He tended to serve as a radio receiver for waves of conversation, all jumbled up so that nothing made much sense. The chances of unravelling who was saying what to whom were minimal when you had to keep both eyes glued to the road ahead—plus side mirrors. No way you could swing your head around for even a second to try and pinpoint where the enticing snatches of conversation were coming from.

Sure, it was lonely at the top—as all those stars on millions a year insisted on telling us through the tabloids—but people did not appreciate how lonely it could get behind the wheel of a bus packed to the gills with commuters all looking to this complete stranger up front to get them to their various destinations along the route—and at the appointed time.

And what did he have to look forward to at the end of his shift?

A big thankyou for a job well done?

A merit award for getting a thousand men, women and children, or more, safely through conditions that, some days, resembled a city under retreat from an encroaching enemy?

Yeah, sure. The most Sid could expect—and it usually came unexpectedly—was a 'Thank you, driver,' from a passenger as they alighted. A recognition that the Sid Brookses of the world did account for something in their lives. Coming when it did—and as it did—from a complete stranger, gave Sid a special lift in his day. It compensated for the disregard in which most people apparently held his profession. A public utility. One more cog in the wheel of metropolitan necessity.

Sid let out a big sigh waiting for the lights to change along King Street.

Billy's revelation the previous night aside, there were no surprises in life anymore.

Everything operated by rote.

He drove by rote. He played by rote, the music still taking him away from the familiarity of the daily grind, but there was little joy in it now. He knew the songs backwards, inside out, upside down and any which way anybody cared to challenge him on. He could convince you a Lennon and McCartney tune was in fact a Dizzie Gillespie and vice versa and up and down the scale.

What he could not do was ignite that flame inside himself that first burnt bright when he picked up his horn as a gangly youth.

Discovering Miles Davis and how one genius could sketch images of Spain with a trumpet. *Knowing* what he was born to do with his life. Bring his music to The People. He never for a moment thought of himself as a talent to challenge Miles Davis. That would have been crazy—and his old man thought him plenty of that already when he announced he was going to be a jazz muso!

If you could have done a *Back to the Future* like Marty McFly, and asked Sid back then what was the last career move in the world he could imagine, a driver of public transport buses would most likely not even have entered the equation. Life had a wicked way of tripping up your dreams, that was for certain.

The lights changed from red to green. Sid eased the handbrake, put the bus into gear. He was about to drive off when he glanced to his side, seeing Billy walking straight towards the closed bus doors from the intersection across the footpath. If Sid didn't do something, and quick, Billy would walk right smack dab into the doors.

Slamming his foot on the brake and causing a sudden jolt through to the back of the bus—passengers jerked forwards and backwards in their seats and where they stood along the aisle—Sid pulled the lever to open the doors. A release of pneumatic air and they folded back open.

Billy ...' Sid chirped as Billy stepped up onto the bus, hands stuck firmly in his pockets.

Billy passed him with a sublime smile and joined the other standing passengers, ignoring the mumbled 'He didn't pay his fare!' 'Who does he think he is?'

Fare? Didn't these people realise *something wonderful* was about to brighten their dull existence?

Closing the doors, Sid leaned around the cabin divider with a look of concern. He wanted to ask his mate if everything was A-okay. The honking of irritated motorists prompted him into action.

He just made the crossing on the yellow light.

'As far as we go, Billy ...'

Sid had stopped the bus at the end of Glebe Point Road at dusk, turning off the motor and craning around in his seat to Billy seated at the back of the bus.

'Billy ...?'

Still no answer. He could have been one of those life-sized papier-mâché sculptures plonked down in the seat for all the response Sid was getting.

'End of the line, mate,' Sid tried.

Finally, Billy turned his head away from the window with a serene expression. 'Sid ... it's only the beginning ...' And with that, he stood

up and went to the middle doors, set on leaving the bus.

Sid quickly opened the doors and rose from his seat, watching Billy step down and outside.

Billy gazed across the sloping green of the park, past the sprawling oak to the giant arches of the partly built Glebe Island bridge. The headlights of continuous traffic flowing across the antiquated bridge the new structure was replacing reflected upon the darkening water in vertical sheets.

Sid came down to the bottom step at the front of the bus.

'What if it's a gift ...?' Billy said, not so much to Sid as to the night sky.

'A gift ...?' Sid said.

Billy walked away from the bus, leaving it at an angle, headed across the lawn towards a bench near the fenced-off water's edge.

'Right,' Sid said quietly, '... a gift ...' The voice from last night.

And there it was again, drifting back up the slope of lawn from the park bench where Billy had sat himself—on the back of the bench, shoes on the seat.

Billy, drawing on a plaintive Billie song, was asking the sky why he had been born ... and striking a chord in Sid, who could have done with a couple of clues himself.

Yes—what's it all about, and so on? The Big Questions some people climbed to the top of mountains to seek answers to from wise old gurus.

Billy's new voice spread out over the glassy water, where a trawler chugged by, and gently tugged at Sid's shirt collar with a pair of invisible hands.

'Righto, old son,' a force seemed to be saying to him, 'you want out of Gridlock, here's your ticket! *What are you going to do about it?*'

'Okay, okay!' Sid yelped back, grabbing his shirt collar. He walked back to the cabin, leaned over the seat and got out his trumpet case.

All these questions were swimming around in Billy's head and finding their way into the night through his voice and onto the gentle breeze whispering across the bay. From behind, the mellow sounds of a trumpet drew his head around to Sid strolling down the slope towards the park bench, playing soulfully along with the melody of Billy's song.

Two hearts joined as one, sending a ripple of new-found belief in the things that really matter into the night, now glittering with stars.

CCCCCHAAAAR—UGGG! VAAAROOOM!

Behind them, the unattended, darkened bus sprang to life, the motor turning over, lights coming on inside and out.

Billy and Sid stiffened. Then swung around in unison. The bus now purring like a great pet demanding attention.

'A sign ...?' Sid gulped.

Billy thought about it first. 'From whom ...?'

Sid mulled over it a few seconds. 'Beats the shit out of me . . .'

The spell broken, they returned to the demanding steel creature, Sid getting up behind the wheel, Billy on the first seat opposite inside.

'Just the beginning, eh?' Sid looked across at Billy.

It was a question not requiring an answer. Sid was making a decision of his own. He turned back to the wheel, changed gear and drove off, his adrenalin charged. *Turbocharged!*

Billy, caught unprepared for the gravitational shift, made a grab for support.

'What's the rush?' he said out loud.

'Fasten your seat belt, matey,' Sid cried out over the roar of the motor, 'I reckon we're going on the ride of our lives!'

Sid was on fire! And it wasn't any piddling wood stove. This was a ship's furnace!

Twenty minutes later the bus pulled up before the open entrance gates to the bus depot, buses crowding the wide yard. Billy had never experienced such a ride. Luck was on their side, handing them every green light between departure and arrival at the depot. Another sign?

The motor turned over for a long minute, Billy anxiously trying to gauge Sid's next move. He had tried to elicit some clue from Sid on the way. His nerve-racked queries had fallen on deaf ears. Now, Sid had the manner of a hunter seeking his prey in a forest. Numb to all else,

every nerve end finely tuned to the cross hairs
of his weapon—only, in this case, the weapon
was not a high-powered rifle.

It was this bus.

And, there, crossing the yard—the prey!

Rost marched stiff-legged, humming aloud
to a military rhythm. He felt good! Field Marshal-
good! He had Sid Brooks on toast the moment
he returned to the depot.

Four-O-One, packed to the gills with irate
civilians, had been left standing like a parade
ground Private on solo discipline, waiting for the
essential connection Brooks was scheduled to
make. On toast! Rost had already made a
Command Decision, to take his cue from George
C. Scott's opening barrage in *Patton* when strip-
ping Brooks of his driving duties and banishing
him to Lost Property until retirement.

Two blazing headlights, catching him the
way those heroic POW boys were exposed at the
wire in *The Great Escape*, snapped Rost out of his
reverie. The roar of the heavy transport machin-
ery closing in on him spurred him into action.
He backed off at a fast pace, mesmerised by the
headlights, terrified by their intensity, not certain
what lay behind him—certainly not the freedom
the escapees sought from their German POW
camp.

Rost caught squarely in his headlights, Sid
beamed down from behind the wheel of the bus
humming forward, his foot gently pressing the
brake, the roar of the motor conveying a fear to

his prey that the threat was far greater than it actually appeared.

'Maybe ... this isn't one of your best ideas ...?' Billy cried out, holding on for dear life, as convinced as Rost that a very bad thing was in the process of happening.

'Hhheeeeellllppp me!' Rost's scream sliced through the public utilities somnolence of the depot, alerting staff to the extraordinary thing taking place in their midst—a bus looming down on their much 'beloved' supervisor.

This was too much to wish for in their wildest dreams!

Rost—crushed like the bug he was!

Eradicated forever from their lives!

Bliss!

A dirty screeching of braking tyres! Another trapped-animal cry in the jungle! The wincing of eyes around the depot, hands clasped to faces against the inevitable—the moment of *The Big Crunch* was at hand!

Later, in the gaggle of discussion that would follow Sid's actions this night and be writ large in the mythology of the city's transport system, there would be those witnesses who would swear they heard a banshee cry just before bus and Rost connected.

""Gridlock!"" Your turn, Rost!"

Sid's bus motor stalled, spluttered, died.

Silence.

Eyes were prised open. Heads turned around in unison, hands lowered from faces.

Sid, hands still on the wheel, rose from the driver's seat, peering down onto his handiwork.

The burning headlights swamped Rost in white light, revealing him pinned against the wall, his back pressed tight to it—terrified beyond a normal man's capacity to virtually have his life's blood drained from him and still be considered alive!

Jerking the lever to open the doors, Sid was out of the cabin in a wink with his trumpet case and bag, and around to the front of the bus. Billy stepped warily up to the window inside, daring a look-see.

'Have . . . you . . . gone completely . . . insane?' Rost, throat parched with fear, found the words amongst the sagebrush inside his throat. Sure, it hurt all the way to Hades and back trying to speak, almost as much as the bus bumper bar parked right into his gut. *'You'll . . . never . . . drive . . . a bus . . . in this . . . town . . . again!'* He managed something he vaguely recollected as a breath, *'In this—country!'*

'That's . . . fine . . . with . . . me!' Sid mimicked Rost's delivery. *'You . . . can . . . take . . . Four-O-Bloody-One and park it where the sun don't shine!'* Snapping his heels to attention, Sid went to salute in true military fashion. As his hand made its way to his forehead, it stopped short at his nose where he stuck his thumb, wiggled his fingers and poked out his tongue.

Applause broke out across the depot, and

cheers and whistles. Blinded as he was by the blazing headlights—now sending spots dancing across his limited field of vision—Rost had no way of bearing true eyewitness to his own humiliation for a parade ground dressing down with his errant troops.

'No—definitely not one of your better ideas!' Billy said, gazing at Rost between the corner of the bus and Sid.

Sid walked briskly away, seeing another bus entering the yard. He hurried past Billy, waving the bus to a stall.

'Hard up against my rig, Marty!' he called up to the driver on the open cabin window side. 'Rost's trying out a new stacking system!'

The driver shrugged—made no difference to him if Rost decided to stack the rigs one-atop-another—and released the handbrake. Sid ducked back across in front of the bus as it moved forward, right smack up against the rear bumper of Sid's vehicle.

Sid gave the driver the 'thumbs up' then opened his trumpet case and brought out his horn. Handing the case and his bag to Billy, he inserted the mouthpiece, ignoring Rost's repeated threats and calls for help, and gave the instrument a blow like he had never blown in his life.

Carried along on a wave of applause from his ex-workmates, Sid left the yard, playing a heart-stirring blues riff, Billy following with the luggage.

Sid's shoes felt like angel's wings, carrying him off into a new life. His heart and his lungs were one, his music soaring.

CHAPTER

13

BILLY APPLES THE NEXT INXS?

Casey read the headline for the umpteenth time, studied the picture of Billy outside O'Hara's with Sid, Rob and the twins, went through the two-column report on the front page of the local newspaper.

She could never have imagined how a few weeks could change lives so drastically for the better.

A few, breathtaking weeks in which the name—Billy Apples—and his unique voice seemed to be on the lips and the talking point of everyone in Newtown. And now his fame had spread to print with messages from both morning newspapers waiting for Billy when he arrived home.

School, too, had become a treat. The kids approached her with an air of . . . well, she had to call it respect. The kind of music her dad played wasn't remotely in their universe, but the mere fact that he had become a local celebrity

gave Casey a major boost up the greasy pole of schoolyard social status. The cruel jibes that followed Billy's episode on the roof and his swim in the gutter had vanished.

'Case, wonderin' if yers want to hang out this w'kend?'

'Ah, Case, wouldn't wanna get stuck into this project research wiff me, would ya?'

'Hey, Case, me'n some of the gang're doin' Big Mac's'n a movie Satd'y. Love ya to come!'

'Case, it's me oldie's birfd'y next week, m' mum's—she'd be real stoked if yer could, you know, maybe ... if it ain't askin' too much ... get Billy t' sing her Happy Birthd'y—on this cassette, like ...?'

And on it went, from recess to lunch to afternoon recess and after school.

Her head stuck in the books, cramming in a whole stack of info that had breezed through her mind at the time it had been imparted by her teachers, Casey had not been immediately attuned to the change in the ether.

Billy had made her aware of the strange thing that had happened to him on the night of 'the roof incident' on the day following his inglorious 'swim in the gutter'. He sat her down at the kitchen table, clearing his throat, tugging at his collar, facing her like he was about to put on a show. Which it was, in a way.

Finally primed, he opened his mouth and began to sing, 'Am I Blue'—only it wasn't Billy singing at all, it was ... as close as she could

place it, someone else—a woman!—inside of him singing.

At first, Casey believed it was a trick, something he had picked up from one of his regular customers.

There were a couple of Appleby Hardware veterans who loved nothing more than playing tricks on people. Billy would try one or two of them out on other people, less successfully than their warped originators, with Casey being the target of a couple of recent ones.

Billy got it into his head that these stunts had heaps to do with the 'father-daughter' thing, as she had a habit of referring to her relationship with him to Kristin and Melody when the subject of The Oldies arose.

The song coming to an end, Casey waited impatiently for the punch line, Billy full of expectation.

'Okay, Dad,' Casey had sighed, 'I give up. What's the trick?'

'That's just it,' Billy had said, arms gesticulating enthusiastically. 'No trick! It's for real!'

'Sure. You sing like ... like ...'

Billy motioned to the framed photograph of Billie Holiday on the wall among his collection of jazz muso idols.

'... but you're talking the way you always have.' She stood, tugging at the knot in her jacket tied around her waist, no interest whatsoever in the 'trick'.

'Don't you see, Case?' Billy grabbed her by

both arms, making her face him. 'I-have-her-
twice!

'Whatever you say, Dad.' She thought it best, considering the breakthrough in their relationship following their heart-to-heart after 'the swim in, etc., etc.'

'I swear, it's no trick. Listen!'

And he sang again, this time Casey being held firmly to the spot. Not minding it one bit—which surprised her. Normally, Billy's creaky old music bored her to sobs. Playing through the house—*on 78s for God's sake!*—the hissing and scratching was enough to give her a headache. Now, though, she had no sudden desire to flee from it the way she normally did.

His—her! *Their?* voice washed over her, a soothing wave of ... *everything is A-okay* lifting her spirits. If it *was* a trick, she didn't care, because it was one that made her feel wonderful—not a jerk for falling for the ruse.

As Billy continued singing, a simple truth started to dawn on her.

Her dad was something very special. One-in-a-zillion special!

The mundane routine their lives had slipped into after her mum, Louise, had walked out to pursue her career to the top of the entertainment business, had taken a hard turn onto another route within a week of Billy's revelation. O'Hara's, from the reports Casey picked up along King Street from doing the shopping, was literally jumping, taking a leap out of Sleepy

Hollow with a hefty shot of Lady Day magic, courtesy of Billy Apples.

Sid had thrown in his job with the buses to pursue his music full-time. Rob was tickling the ivories like a four-handed pianist. Mack and Jack had become positively animated in their playing. O'Hara told Casey, running into her at the supermarket, the boys were running *hot*! So hot they threatened to activate the overhead fire sprinkler system.

'Come on down and see for yourself,' O'Hara had said. 'Stick to the lemonade but. I gotta say, your dad's got a large dose of something—I dunno what it is, but it sure is catching.'

Casey had badgered Billy to let her go to O'Hara's that night, promising to stick to lemonade, like O'Hara had said.

Getting there was a breeze, the two strolling the half-dozen streets, Billy carrying his trombone case, the two chatting away, mostly about Casey's school problems that didn't seem so problematic as she unravelled them to her father.

'This is what it's all about,' Billy said to himself, warmed by a closeness he could recall from the first few years of Casey's life, when she was finding her voice. 'Strolling, listening, chatting—nothing to it really.' The walk made him feel like a pro in the dad'n-daughter business. 'Father of the Year ... ? Would that be asking too much?'

When they came to King Street, Casey noticed the difference almost at once. The way

past O'Hara's, across the street from them, was as familiar as the worn route home from school and the other journeyman mainstays of growing up in the area.

She could never think of the pub other than as a refuge for aimless souls.

An elephants' graveyard.

A forlorn place of dreams faded and chipped as the brick and tile work it was built of way, way back, windows shaded from inside against the threat of sunlight actually finding its way into their lives. A place you could walk past every day for ten years and not register it was there until someone actually stopped you and pointed it out.

Tonight, Casey could not believe her eyes.

People were crowded around the doorway and along both directions on the footpath. The shades had been removed and light streamed from inside onto the eager punters. Cars were pulling up along the block, necks craning inside to try and see what the gathering was about.

Casey looked up at Billy, his face alight. She gave his free hand a tight squeeze in both of hers.

'Something, eh?' Billy said and guided her across King Street between the stationary cars, horns honking impatiently.

'Here he is!' someone cried out from the front of the crowd.

'Billy! Billy! Billy! Billy! Billy! Billy!' It was a chant made by men and women—and men who looked like women, and the other way around—

flash types you didn't often see around these parts, dressed down and dressed up, the hip and those who badly wanted to be, all impatient for contact with her dad.

'Yous has that jazz, man!' a gruff voice shouted in his ear.

Young! Casey noticed the strong presence of youth among them. If she was on a strict consumption of lemonade tonight, she wouldn't be alone if there was any justice in the world!

'Hey! The Appleman!' Three miniskirted teens, arms draped around each other's shoulders, did a hip-swaying jig in unison, breaking into peels of laughter at the look on Billy's face when he paused to appreciate their flair.

Casey felt like Princess Di and Madonna all in one as the people made way for them through to the front entrance, hands grabbing Billy's shoulders, slapping his back. A gaggle of voices and some applause accompanied them into O'Hara's—where the throng was thicker than outside.

O'Hara, her staff boosted, was working behind the bar like a person with six hands and not a spare second to scratch herself. Glasses clattered, the outdated cash register clanged, money was waved frantically before O'Hara and the staff trying to keep up with the explosion of business—unlike any the pub had probably seen since the Yanks hit town to save the country from the invading Japs fifty years ago.

Billy's entrance did not go unnoticed. The

welcoming, electric charge that had started on the edge of the footpath outside reverberated on through this section of punters. His name was on everyone's lips. The backslapping, hand-shaking, shoulder-grabbing, hair-ruffling continued, with the addition of some neck hugs, wet, red kisses planted on cheeks.

Casey clung to his trombone case, the only chance of making it through without being lost in the commotion. This was ... *a-stounding!* Nothing had prepared her for the wild vibrations O'Hara's was ringing to.

'Up here, Case!' Sid, up on the dais with Rob and the twins, offered down his hand. She grabbed it, placed one foot on the edge of the stage and allowed herself to be pulled up. Billy found his way up next to her, turning to the crowd and raising his hands, like a boxer on championship night.

'How about this, eh?' Sid stood with both hands on his hips, grinning, a gangly kid chuffed to be up here with the champ.

'Man can't hear himself think,' Rob shouted, in an attempt to get his twopence worth in.

'Don't mind him,' Sid said, leaning over to Casey, 'he's got his nose a wee bit out of joint.'

'I heard that.' Rob stuck his head between them. 'My nose is perfectly fine. Just—I liked it better when we were a band ...'

'We are a band,' Sid retorted, rubbing his trumpet.

'When they came to see *us!*'

'Came to see your ugly puss, you mean,' Sid chipped in, turning his back on Rob and winking at Casey.

The night had whizzed past. One moment the band was striking up the first song and three hours later they were packing it in for the night, the crowd—which had grown even larger—shouting for an encore, not wanting him to leave the stage. From her seat at the side of the stage, Casey had *lived* the magic that Billy's voice and the boys' music had made singularly theirs.

Jazz it was, sure—there was no arguing with that, and jazz wasn't her music—but the way she heard it and saw it performed that night, it was a whole world more. One completely unknown to her; one she couldn't wait to explore further.

Kate and Julie had been there that night as well, the two of them seated at a table at the side of the stage, customers around them, dancing on the spot.

'Have you noticed ...' Julie said, playing absently with a huge crystal neckpiece on a gold chain. She couldn't take her eyes off Billy and the way in which he was performing now. It was unlike anything she had ever seen—from a man ... unless you counted one of those drag show artists.

'Mmm,' Kate replied, knowing instinctively what Julie was getting at. Her lips were pressed tight, her mood at complete odds with the gaiety of the crowd.

'You don't think—well ... maybe ...?'
Julie was loath to actually come out and say
it.

'That's what it looks like, doesn't it?' Kate
said curtly.

'It certainly does.'

Billy seemed to be coming from another
dimension. His hand movements, his facial
expression, delivery and overall body language
spoke of a deep, buried aspect of his character—
triggered by his voice—needing to assert itself
now. Not feminine ... yet, not solely of a male
domain either. A physical spirit asserting itself.
Something niggled way back in her mind—
something to do with Julie ... ? Her search into
other lives ... ? The thought was gone before she
could get a grip on it.

'Does it *bother you*?' Julie couldn't stop
herself asking.

Kate didn't reply immediately.

'Yes it does!' she said finally.

'Good,' Julie said, relieved that she wasn't
alone in this. 'It certainly bothers me!'

Kate looked away, at Anna, looking very
classy with her new hairstyle Kate had created
that afternoon, sharing a bottle of Dom Perignon
with her beau. He was besotted by Anna, gazing
at her with the kind of look Kate ached to see
from Billy. As she watched, he took Anna's left
hand in his and brought a ring box from his
inside pocket.

Anna was drawn away from Billy and the

band as an engagement ring was slipped onto her finger.

Kate, happy for Anna, felt thunderclouds and rain gathering around her heart.

The love the couple shared was the way she wanted it to be with her and Billy.

She felt the likelihood of it happening now slipping away from her.

It was bloody amazing how a brief couple of weeks could turn the world upside down. From sitting here in the graveyard (one with a certain warmth to it once you got used to the ambience) that had been O'Hara's, she felt transported to the throbbing surroundings of a pop concert where the audience wanted the star—and that is how Billy appeared up there on the stage, a real, honest-to-God, *genuine star*—exclusively for their own.

And Billy Apples?

'The Appleman'?

The 'Pizazz of Jazz'!

He was lapping it up and—if Kate had to be brutally honest with herself—who could blame him? But at what cost?

'At what cost, Billy?' Kate asked softly.

Next to her, Julie was in a private place of her own—but not on her own—which surprised Kate greatly.

Doubly so, because Sid was there too.

Not the Sid of old. Not the daggy bus driver with a trumpet. Not the bloke who lapped around her heels with gooey-eyed devotion

trying to get a kind word or gesture from her. A sign that he even existed.

That Sid had gone. Replaced by ... this super-confident, deeply feeling player of angels' music. Billy had the voice, granted. Sid? He blew hot! Hotter than a long day in high summer. Hot enough to melt lead—or a heart indifferent to what it had been searching for without success, only to come full circle, the quest ending where it commenced, right at her own front door.

In all her lives, who would have believed it?

The man of her dreams! The man she once had nightmares about!

Sid Brooks!

'Comes a time,' one of her gurus once told her, 'to throw caution to the wind—as high and as far as it will go.' Would he have advised such action if he had known her departure from all reason would come in the shape of Sid Brooks?

Julie let out a huge sigh, nearly swallowing the lump of crystal as she drew back her breath. She coughed fitfully and Kate gave her a whack across the back with the flat of her hand. The crystal shot out.

'I thought the idea of the crystal,' Kate said, 'was to bring you peace—not cut your life short.'

On stage, Sid had trouble concentrating through the middle eight to the last song of the night. He felt an unusual tingling sensation around him, like a light electric current. Glancing around to see if he was stepping on one of the

microphone cords that had suddenly become live, he caught another glimpse of Julie staring at him. Staring? She was literally homing in on him with laserbeam eyes, her intent unquestionable.

'Play it cool, you dog, you.' Sid mustered his defences, finding his way through the middle eight to a new peak, his cheeks ballooning into tennis balls bursting with enough air to send a willy-willy through the place if he had a mind to. Before he knew it, he was up there on a new plane—energised! inspired!—playing only to one, kindred soul.

Hitting the summit, Sid wavered on his feet, momentarily devoid of all breath. He sucked in quickly, ignoring the spots dancing before his eyes, a thunder of applause and whistles reverberating through him.

Wow-eeeeeee!

Confusion! Women converging around Billy on the stage. A babble of excited chatter. Touching! Tugging! Offering up scraps of paper for his autograph!

Rob gazed sourly around, rising with his beer, finding his way off the stage and down through the throng towards the bar.

Sid exchanged a knowing look with Mack and Jack at Rob's departure. The twins shrugged in unison and Sid gave his trumpet a rub, like Aladdin rubbing his magic lamp to make his wish come true. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Julie at the table deep in thought. He

took a shot at being Mr Nonchalant: women the last thing on his mind.

Julie, certain she had Sid exactly where she could grasp the situation firmly with both hands, contemplated her cocktail, adorned with pieces of fresh fruit. Kate's drink, almost untouched, decorated similarly, caught her eye. Her thoughts expanded to the chunk of crystal around her neck, then to her crystal rings and bracelet, a concoction of colour and images sprouting into her head.

Kate had left the table and squeezed her way between the women to get to Billy. Names were flowing from his lips—Miranda! Suzie! Kate (but not her!), Annabelle!—and with each, his hand scribbled out an autograph.

Seated at the end of the bar over his beer, lost in negative thoughts, Rob glanced up. And brightened. Things were looking up. A woman, very sure of herself and where she was headed in life—right now, in his direction—squeezed her way through the football scrum along the bar.

'Now ... this is more like it,' Rob told himself, realising there might, in fact, be something in this for him at long last.

Other scraps of paper were being stuffed into Billy's jacket pockets. Kate snatched one before it joined the others, glowering as she read the woman's name and telephone number on it. She screwed up the note and grabbed hold of Billy's arm, pulling him bodily away from the

women to the back of the stage area.

'What . . . ?' Billy snapped.

'I hardly see you anymore,' Kate said, unable to disguise her sullen mood, —and *what* I do, you're somewhere else. You're *someone* else!'

'What's that s'posed to mean?' Billy acknowledged one of the women, returning her wave.

The Lipstick Power Suit stepped past Rob with complete disinterest. The McSpedden on-heat demeanour crumbled like stale honeycomb.

Billy wasn't making this easy for Kate.

'The way you sing now—,' she lowered her voice, keeping it equally firm. She had to get this off her chest. 'What if . . . she's, you know, inside you?'

'She?' Billy presented her with a puzzled look.

'Her! And I don't mean Margaret Thatcher!' Kate took a breath. 'Can't you see? It changes things! We've all got a bit of the other in us . . .'

Billy was truly puzzled now. 'Other . . . ?'

'Other. I've got a bit of, you know—masculine and you've got a bit of . . .'

'Right,' Billy got the point, fluttering his tie cheekily at her. 'Other.'

'Well, it'd be like going to bed with . . .'

Billy thought about it before he replied simply, 'So?'

Kate was about to jump in boots and all but she was interrupted by the appearance of the

Lipstick Power Suit. The first thing Kate thought of was that her hair styling alone must have cost what amounted to the average weekly wage.

'You have a unique talent, Billy,' the lady announced in a no-beating-around-the-bush tone.

'Lady Day had the talent,' Billy said, as humbly as he could.

'I don't know where it comes from, Billy,' she went on, fishing in the top pocket of her jacket, 'but now you have it.' She took out a business card and pressed it on him. It read: 'Ricki Patterson—Artists & Repertoire—Hot Records.'

'Hot!' Billy made a pretence of handling the card like a hot coal, blowing on it, fingering it delicately.

'We have to talk,' Ricki stated, her hand going out to shake Billy's.

Kate, separated from Billy by the She Devil's back and other customers pushing their way past, felt like a pimple on the skin of absolute perfection.

At the bar, Rob was deep in his cups and mumbling morosely to himself, finding what little solace he could in self-righteousness, '... what he is doing is ... he is deliberately betraying the time-honoured principles of the Musicians' Brotherhood ... with gay ... with gay ... *abandon* ... he is ... is ...'

'Night, Rob,' Kate said as she passed him, pulling her handbag over one shoulder.

Rob gave her a wave. Why was she leaving

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alone? He gazed around for a sight of Billy, finding him deep in conversation with the Lipstick Power Suit.

‘—*totally destroying the fabric of the craft!*’ he said out loud and drained his beer. No one around him took a blind bit of notice of his ramblings.

About to order a shandy at the bar, Sid felt someone sidle up to him. He was about to make room for whoever it was and stopped himself, Julie’s familiar scent intoxicating him.

She had come to him! He was no longer *the chasee!*

Julie set a marvellous creation down on the bar in front of him. A drink brimming with fruits, flashes of light dancing off shiny baubles set into the fruit, two straws poking out. She bent to one straw, her inviting eyes fixed squarely on Sid, daring him to accept this elixir from the gods.

Sid felt his Adam’s apple elevate in his throat then sink, he could have sworn, to his stomach.

What was he letting himself in for?

‘Only everything you’ve ever wanted, *you mug!*’ a voice screamed inside his head.

His lips went to the other straw and he drank, lost in Julie’s eyes, knowing, for the first time, what it felt like to be hit across the head with a sledge hammer and want more of the same!

CHAPTER

14

I've got to be straight with you, Billy boy—'n' that's the only way to be in this business—straight. When Ricki told me, "Forties Torch Songs!", I said, *Budget label! Dumper bins! Nine ninety-five! If we're lucky!*

Kevin Freckle, chief executive of Hot Records, sat across from Billy, with Ricki seated between them, at a strategically appointed table in a Kings Cross brasserie. Dressed in a garish, tropical fruit shirt—suggesting he had just alighted from a jumbo out of Miami where he had snaffled up costumes left over from drug cartel characters in the defunct *Miami Vice* TV series—Kev (as he insisted on being called and woe betide anyone overheard referring to him as The Freckle) waved a piece of pickled octopus on a fork at Billy as he talked.

Billy—hair spruced, clean-shaven and wearing aftershave, dressed in a shirt and tie and blue suit only a decade out of style but still fitting snugly—felt a strange kinship with the

chunk of octopus when Kev chomped into it.

'But—'Forties Torch Gender Bent,' Kev continued as he chewed, speaking in headlines, 'that's a different kettle of sardines!' His voice had the charm of an ageing footy star trying to squeeze a living out of flogging stuff on the telly at discount prices so low you had to be astounded anyone could be that dumb to sell the stuff at all—and what's more, you didn't have to pay a cent in interest for at least six months!

'Gender ...?' Billy said to himself tentatively, playing with his salad. He hadn't touched a piece of food since their lunch had been served. From the moment he was introduced to Kev by Ricki, his appetite had disappeared.

Freckle, once a minor rock 'n' roller in the early 'sixties when the necessity of actually being able to carry a note was of no real consequence, had to be Billy's age—or more—while trying to convey, with his style of grooming and dress, that he was hip enough to be dating Kylie Minogue. His pruned-to-the-skull, receding hair sat over a ruddy pork-chop face that had spent too many hours under the ray lamp. A pair of devious eyes—one stray—were framed by black glasses. The hefty gold chain around his generously open-necked shirt, which fell onto a thick carpet of black hair (a chest toupée? Billy wondered), was matched by another on one wrist. A constant sniffing through one nostril tempted Billy to offer him a handkerchief.

From his handshake on, Billy felt queasy,

asking himself what he was doing there. Oh, he knew well enough—Ricki had insisted on taking him to lunch with her chief executive when she introduced herself out of the blue at O'Hara's.

'Hot's the place for Billy Apples,' she had said emphatically, reeling off a string of names recording for the label—names Billy had never heard of. Names he would have associated more with the kind of injuries you would expect to find in Emergency at a hospital, or on the cell walls of the local cop shop. 'If they're not with Hot—then hot *they are not!*'

Ricki's enthusiasm for Billy and the band was seductive and he could not very well have refused.

Not with Sid nearly peeing in his pants with excitement when he heard a record company had, well, the hots for the band. The twins were equally chuffed. Rob muttered something about 'fabric of the craft' and, being outvoted, left it at that. Billy had a feeling he was actually over the moon about the idea as well, but Rob would never come out and say as much.

'Record Company' spelt 'Capitalist Exploitation.' Rob McSpedden, who exploited his profession for every dollar he could wheedle out of people, would never, *never!* submit to the degrading, exploitative system of a capitalist enterprise.

'Go'n stick your snout in the trough—eat munchies,' Rob sniffed, 'but understand one thing, boyo, they only get our music on our terms.'

The brasserie buzzed with conversation, clattered with cutlery on plates large enough to use as life rafts, clinked with wineglasses being filled with wines Billy guessed you'd have to save for a month to afford.

'Ah ... what was that first bit ...?' Billy asked out loud.

'Forties torch,' Kev replied. He wasn't a man who liked repeating himself. Mostly because he had trouble remembering what he said after he had said it. Kev shot from the hip.

'The next bit ...?'

'Gender ...'

'That's the bit ...'

'Bent.' Kev gulped another chunk of octopus, swallowed half a glass of wine. 'Big units in that section of the market, Billy-boy. *Big*.'

'The last time I wore a dress,' Billy started, then decided against going into it. 'Well ... it was the last time I wore a dress.'

Ricki saw Billy's eyes starting to glaze over. This was not going to be as easy as she had expected. Wading into the pond after a catch over the age of sixteen was a precarious venture.

'It's a ... buzzword, Billy,' she offered with an airy wave of one hand.

'Big units to be had when you're a Mighty Man, Billy-boy. *Big*!'

What Ricki thought was a 'glaze' was in fact a 'reality flash'. Seated across from Billy, in his mind's eye, was not Kev, but Reg Conroy and

he was twirling a fork around—with Billy, the size of a piece of octopus, on it.

Billy blinked Reg away just as Conroy was about to swallow him whole.

'We can have dynamite units with Billy,' Ricki jumped in, a gentle hand on his arm, reassuring him, 'without tampering with his own special ...'

'No argument!' Kev said abruptly. His cellular phone beeped and he picked it up from the table, still talking, 'Let's just keep an open mind on where we can take this thing—okay?' He answered the call, scatter-gunning 'Yes, yes, yes ...'

Ricki gave Billy's arm a squeeze. It said, 'Don't worry about a thing.'

Finally, Kev barked into the phone, 'Look, I agree with everything you say, but the answer is *no*!' He returned to Billy and the octopus, signalling to the waiter at the same time for another bottle of wine. 'An open mind—okay, Billy-boy?'

Billy nodded. He needed time to get his head together on this.

'Whose ears do you hear on this?' Kev directed the question straight at Ricki, bringing up the vital subject of exactly *who* was going to produce this 'masterpiece'.

'Grant ...' She didn't get the full name out.

'Trouble.' Kev gave a curt shake of the head, giving the impression this 'Grant' was suspected of being the second gunman in Kennedy's assassination.

'Grant's cars—*best in the business.*' She stood her ground.

'Before "Tea Time At Belsen" and that ... "thing",' Kev glanced around, lowering his voice, ' ... with the bass player ...'

'Drummer.'

'Bass player.' His word was final. 'I was thinking ... more along the lines of ...'

He left it dangling as the waiter presented a second bottle of wine. Billy figured the lunch bill must be up to around a thousand bucks by now.

'You're not going to fight me on this?' Kev was puckering up for a right to the chin.

'Okay Kev, whose ears do *you* hear?'

'I want your word, "Ms Always-Have-To-Have-The-Last-Word", this time, no punch-ups!' Kev waved a finger at her. 'I'm getting too old to go in the ring with you ...'

'Yes, all that platinum and gold hanging on your walls—must be a real burden,' Ricki said, sickly sweet.

'Which way to the ... ?' Billy interjected.

They turned as one to him, Ricki's smile frozen, Kev presenting Billy with a momentary look that asked, 'Who in the hell are you and what are you doing at my table?'

'Straight down the stairs,' Ricki pointed, anxious to get back to Kev's thoughts on production, to find a way of wheedling him around to what *she* wanted.

Billy got up and walked away from the table.

'Little boys' room on the right,' Kev said as Billy passed, then took a swig of wine before adding, over his shoulder in Billy's direction, 'gender benders on the left!'

At the top of the stairs, Billy froze, his shoulders involuntarily hunching. Of course, he's taking the mickey out of me, that's all! He continued on down the stairs.

Billy washed his hands in the basin, glancing up at himself in the overhead mirror—and gasped in disbelief. Facing him was Billy Apples all right, but he was wearing an over-the-top Carmen Miranda collage of fruit on his head. His face was made up and he looked different enough to actually attract the wrong sort of people on the wrong side of town.

'Strange ... ' Billy heard himself react, '... fruit ...?' Both hands went up to touch the collage. In an instant, it was gone. He blinked, flicking water at his mirror image, his puss back to normal. 'God, what're these people doing to my mind?'

Straightening his tie and patting his hair into place, Billy decided that the only way to handle these people was with iron gloves.

They were going to listen to his needs!

Either they agreed to go with him and the band as they were or they could forget the whole business!

Plenty of deals where this one was coming from!

Early days!

'... look, "Ms Murphy-Joan-of-Arc-Roseanne-Brown",' Kev said aloud, the heads of the nearest diners turning in their direction, 'whoever we go with on "Mr Gender Bender"—we're not talking marriage here, agreed? A one-night stand'll do us nicely. Keep the budget down and the hype up for as long as the units move. Then drop him off the end of the jetty!'

Ricki's stomach turned. Billy, coming back to the top of the stairs, had heard everything. Before she could stop him, he was striding out of the brasserie and hailing a passing taxi on the street.

'Thanks heaps, Kev,' she gestured in the direction of the doorway.

Kev craned his neck in time to see Billy get into the taxi and drive off.

'You really have a *magic way* with talent,' Ricki sneered, the poison dripping from her tongue, her eyes pinpricks of blood in the snow.

Kev shrugged. 'It's a gift. Dessert ...?' He clicked his fingers in the direction of the nearest waiter, all thought of Billy cleansed from his mind.

Billy's insides were a see-saw and he couldn't understand why. He had put Hot Records behind him, yet something was trying to tell him the worst of his worries weren't over for the day.

The taxi turned into Newman Street and slowed at his house. Whatever it was seated on the other side of the see-saw was on the ascent. Paying the fare, he got out of the taxi and faced the house.

Why did it feel as if he was about to step into Norman Bates's *Psycho* house on the knoll behind his motel?

Why did his feet feel like slabs of quarry stone?

Opening the door, he paused in the doorway, hearing Casey's voice from the kitchen.

The sense of foreboding intensified.

He closed the door and walked on through. It became obvious Casey wasn't alone.

'... and with Dad, you know, on the hop from one show to the next,' she sounded very chirpy—proud, even, '... well, things are different round here. Dad's different.'

Coming to the kitchen doorway, Billy stopped, seeing Casey, her back to him, busily making a pot of tea for a guest, also with her back to him.

Billy's flesh crawled.

Every single hair on his body became electrified.

His bones turned to jelly.

His blood ran sub-zero.

'Dad, you're back,' Casey said, a nervous edge springboarding into her voice. 'Look who's here ...'

Billy had no voice.

'Hello, Billy ... ' Louise, the former Mrs Billy Apples, caught biting into a biscuit, half-turned to him.

'Mum just popped out of the blue again! Can you believe it ... ?' Casey darted a look from Billy to Louise and back to Billy.

'Always full of surprises,' Billy managed faintly, 'that's your mum for you ... '

Louise swallowed and brushed a crumb from the corner of her mouth with a long red fingernail. In the dull light of the kitchen, Billy could have sworn she hadn't aged a day since they last saw her, nearly two and a half years ago. Her hair was cropped short, brushed forward around the edges to frame her face. Wearing a bright red leather miniskirt and matching jacket and dark top, red high heels, she could have passed for Casey's older sister.

'I've been playing the clubs out west,' Louise said with a flourish, full of confidence, then added, voice dropping a step, '... away ... '

'And you thought you'd mosey on down to see if we were still alive,' Billy said, affecting a cowboy twang and removing his coat.

Louise smiled thinly. Facing the truth had never been one of her virtues. 'They still remember us, Billy. Dear, sweet people they are. Salt of the earth.' Suddenly she was all business. 'You should get yourself out there. I could line up some dates through my agent ... '

'Just like the old days. Louise and ... ' Billy

gestured aimlessly. 'Louise and "What's 'is name?" "Mr Middle Eight ..."' He feigned playing a trombone.

His acidic manner struck a nerve end with Louise. She sought refuge in Casey, reaching out to touch her hair.

'Hasn't she grown?' Not so much an observation as a diversion.

'A couple of years will do that to a kid ... ' Billy draped his coat over the back of a chair.

'I did write.' Louise went on the defence. 'I phoned regularly ...'

Casey withdrew from Louise's touch, not wanting to become the meat in this particular sandwich.

'I was thinking ... ' Louise said.

'All on your lonesome?' Billy feigned surprise.

'I could open up some very important doors with the clubs for you, Billy ... ' she paused, mid-pitch, taking a cup from Casey. 'Thanks, honey.' She took a sip. 'Perfect.' Returning to the task at hand, she homed in on Billy. 'I can't tell you—people are hungry for the good old songs and ...'

Casey, at Louise's side, glowered at Billy: *Don't even consider it, Dad!*

Before Louise could continue, the front doorbell rang.

Billy gave Louise a 'hold-that-thought' gesture—not that he was even remotely interested in any scheme she had been cooking up—

and went for the front door, truly in awe of the grapevine. He packs them in in Newtown, and way out west—who knows how ~~way~~, ~~way out~~ Louise had to go these days to find a booking for her style of quasi-Shirley Bassey-cum-Liza Minnelli-cum-Sammy Davis Jr. lay-it-on-with-a-trowel sincerity—she smells success shaping up as if she were one suburb away! Then scoots back here in double-quick time, heart and mind set on handcuffing herself to the band!

‘Well, you can forget it, Louise,’ Billy grumbled to himself. ‘I’m well past the I Who Have Nothing-Climb Every Mountain-If I Ruled The World-I Am I Said, et al. of my career!’

Kate waited at Billy’s front door, butterflies in her tummy, holding a tray covered with a fresh linen tea towel in one hand and a bottle of the best bubbly in the other, humming to herself.

‘Whenever in doubt,’ one of her aunts had once told her, ‘have yourself a bit of a hum. Works a miracle.’

‘Okay, but will it work on Billy Apples?’ Kate wondered now.

Leaving O’Hara’s the night ‘Ms Power Suit’ squeezed her way into their lives, Kate had stewed over the recent turn of events that had sent Billy steaming off on one route and her into a railway siding.

All women fear the spectre of The Other Woman coming between her and her man. Who, in their wildest dreams, could have come up with a scenario where a woman—or the *essence*

of one—wheedled her way *inside* a man?

Jealousy wasn't new to Kate. Throughout her relationships, she had, to put it bluntly, 'been there and done that'. The experiences had taught her that jealousy could be a positive force; after all, if a man wasn't worth getting even the slightest bit jealous over, he probably wasn't worth getting involved with in the first place.

She had been attracted to Billy from the time she first met him after moving into the shop and setting up the New Moon salon.

He struck her as an odd kind of fellow, an overgrown boy in a shambling, mature body, with both feet firmly on the ground. There was no arguing that he did need work, though not the kind of overhaul that some men needed.

Billy had a heart as big as all of Uluru and a smile to match, a head start if ever Kate had seen one. She had known men with hearts as *hard* as Uluru and smiles that hid the intent of Satan himself, so it wasn't as if she was having herself on about the potential treasure she had unearthed a couple of shopfronts down from her.

When it came to analysing where she had come with Billy and the minor upheavals of late, Kate had decided that that was what they were—minor—and they had to be evened out.

The door opened.

She faced Billy and he faced her. The only difference was that he didn't convey even the slightest hint of recognition.

'Billy ...?' Kate frowned.

The moment passed. He smiled. Taking decisive action, Kate handed him the bubbly and whipped back the tea towel, presenting a whole mountain trout on a tray surrounded by fresh tiger prawns and oysters on the shell.

'Dinner—on me!'

'*They just luuuuuurve me out west!*' Louise's shrill cry chimed out as clear as the bells of Notre Dame and Big Ben.

Billy winced and Louise looked up and around.

'You'd better . . . ' Billy motioned for her to come in, stepping aside for her to enter. Kate hesitated. He guided her in by the elbow. 'Company . . . ' he gestured towards the kitchen with the bottle.

'Maybe this isn't the appropriate . . . ' Kate held back, not sure she wanted to discover who—or *what*, from the sound of the voice—was waiting in the kitchen.

'No—please.' Billy closed the door behind her, ushering her through the lounge room towards the rear of the house.

They were about to enter the kitchen when the doorbell rang again. Billy handed the bottle back and gave a flutter of his hand, suggesting Kate go on in, and turned back to answer the door again.

The door opened on two bottles of champers held in midair.

'*Record stars!*' Sid declared in his best Jimmy Durante, parting the two bottles on his mugging

face. Mack and Jack poked their heads out on either side and Julie appeared over the top of his head, followed by Rob, also injected with the spirit of foolishness.

Billy let out a long sigh, his demeanour sending up warning flares. He signalled with a jerk of the thumb for them to come in.

'Party's in the kitchen,' he said flatly.

They trooped by him, Sid bringing up the rear, reading Billy's dour look and not liking the news it conveyed.

Within moments, Sid's world had collapsed.

'I had the rest of my life planned out ... ' he moaned, crestfallen, having to sit at the table before his knees gave up on him.

'Our lives,' Julie added, fixing Billy with a scowl.

'I saw us ... MTV ... touring—concerts,' Sid went on, head bowed into both hands, '... big concerts ...'

Billy insisted that it didn't seem right.

'You have wilfully discarded a ... God-given opportunity to take our music to the hungry masses—' Rob was infused with surprising indignation.

'A record contract!' Louise yelled in disbelief.

'Big breaks don't just drop out of the sky, you know.' Casey was with Louise, staying put next to her. This would need a unified force.

'—people are starving—starving—for decent music, but you don't give a toss? Do

you?' Rob was pacing around in front of Mack and Jack.

Sid gazed into the abyss. 'Finished, I am. I'll never drive a bus in this town again—not after what I did to ...'

'You walked out on a—' Louise gave an abrupt shake of the head. 'Tell me I'm not hearing this ...'

'I'll talk to what's'isname ... make him understand why you squashed him up against the wall ...' Billy said, trying to console Sid.

'You walked out on a—', Louise was incredulous, her face turning as red as her outfit, 'record contract!'

Billy shot her a look: *What's it got to do with you?*

He sought understanding from Mack and Jack. 'It's a gift ... they want to turn it into ...' his mouth went sour, ' ... something in a dress ... a fruit bowl on my head ...'

'Give me the fookin' dress! I'll wear it!' Rob faced him.

'I'll wear a dress!' Sid brightened. There was hope!

'We'll wear the fruit!' Mack and Jack got into the act.

'Comrades in arms! A unit!' Rob went back to pacing. 'All for one!

'People would *kill to record!*' Louise was threatening to launch into the stratosphere.

Billy whipped around, reading her true sentiments in her face, a dead giveaway.

'Hey! Hey! I thought we were all family here?' Kate tried to introduce a calming influence, the tray of seafood lying on the table before her.

Louise reached for one of the bottles of champers, scanning Kate from head to toe. Kate felt herself being strip-searched by laserbeam eyes.

'I didn't realise Billy had a . . . ' Louise said to Casey as she grappled with the cork, not caring whether Kate heard or not.

'Kate's nice,' Casey replied.

'Does she sing?' Louise asked, then added in Kate's direction, 'Do we sing?' The champagne cork popped. '*Sing, do we?*'

Before Kate could reply, Louise turned to the cupboards searching for a glass. The front doorbell rang. Rob went for it, striding from the kitchen in a mad grumble.

Louise poured a glass of champagne then lifted the corner of the tea towel to inspect the goodies set out on the tray. Kate looked on in horror as she picked up a prawn and bit into it.

A little less than ten minutes had passed since Kate had arrived with the tray of food and bottle of champagne and had been given a brief introduction to the former Louise Appleby who made it plain by her body language that there was no place for Kate in her orbit whatsoever.

Kate's first instinct was to advise her on the correct way to preserve the roots of her hair if Louise was going to continue to dye the life out

of it. But Kate's main concern was the preservation of her relationship with Billy, now that 'the ex' was on the scene again. *Why?* that was the question she had to get to the bottom of. Let her ruin her hair, she thought. Louise was old enough to look after herself.

'And not doing too good a job of it,' Kate gloated inwardly, feeling very good about herself, her new hairstyle and the smart, casual outfit that Julie had said buried a good ten years.

Billy wanted very badly to be somewhere else—the middle of the outback, opal mining, would do nicely right now. Or maybe lost in Antarctica? Yes, that was a comforting thought.

Rob returned, grinning, and with a dangerous swagger, the kind of air he took on when he had another likely prospect in his sights.

'Just when Custer thought it was for keeps this time—,' he said with a crooked, movie star delivery, 'who should pop out of the blue ... ?'

He stood aside. Ricki Patterson paused in the doorway, holding a bottle of vodka.

'I hope I'm not ... ' she glanced around at the strange faces. She *hated* strange faces. They diminished her ability to control a room. And they were all so ... *old!* Except for the kid and she was of no interest because she wasn't looking to Ricki to change her life with a recording contract.

Before she could finish speaking, Rob ushered her into the kitchen, announcing to

these not in the know, 'Folks, the Hot Records lady—Ricki ...' He dried.

'Patterson,' Ricki smiled around, interested only in Billy. 'Hello again, Billy.'

He gave her the glimmer of a smile.

'Hot—Hot Records ... ?' Louise gulped back her second prawn. 'You're from ... ?'

Ricki answered with a slight nod and a thin-lipped smile, anxious to sort this thing out quickly, 'Billy ...'

'We made a record—,' Louise moved around the table towards Ricki. 'Billy and me, that is ...'

'Ancient history,' Billy snapped.

'A Golden Oldie,' Louise retaliated, eyes thinning. 'I heard it only two weeks ago—out west ...' she placed herself between Billy and Ricki, patting at her hair self-consciously. 'I tour constantly. All the major clubs,' she said in a matter-of-fact way, then picked up the pace. 'We could have made No. 1 nationally, but the Stones, they had to go and release their latest single. Zap! Straight to the top! Ten weeks! Ten-whole-weeks—stole the No. 1 spot from us! There should be a law!' She played the room with a rise of jingoism, one forefinger playing over everyone, gunslinger fashion. '*Australian radio—Australian listeners—Australian talent!*'

'Billy!' Kate wanted to scream, '*do something! Belt her across the head with the champagne bottle! Strangle her! Just shut her up!*'

'Who knows,' Louise glanced at Billy, bringing him into her loop, 'maybe we could do it all over again ... ?' And she started to sing: 'I had too much to love ... last time ...'

Casey stepped between Louise and Ricki, eager to separate them, using the fridge as a distraction, excusing herself to Louise. She made a pretence of busying herself inside the fridge, while glowering up at Billy, the message clear: *Get Mum out of here!*

'Juice orange?' Casey's tongue tripped over the words, holding up a carton to Ricki, adding, 'I mean—champagne juice ... ?'

'Thank you, hon,' Louise took the carton before going back to the cupboard to get a glass.

A tense air permeated the kitchen. Rob, Sid, Julie, Mack and Jack—and to a certain extent, Kate—were anxious to hear what Ricki had to say.

'Billy,' Ricki said, 'the more I thought about it—well, if it ain't broke, why try and fix it?'

'My sentiments exactly.' Rob presented a serious face to the twins, who nodded in unison.

Louise, pouring herself a hefty orange juice and champagne, prepared to come in swinging the moment weight was needed to push Billy where he had to be pushed.

'You are—who you are,' Ricki said evenly, trusting in her mannered sincerity to save the day.

'Exactly,' Louise said.

Casey tried to admonish her by transmitting a facial message to her.

'You want us?' Sid piped up, unable to believe his good fortune. The abyss wasn't an abyss after all—it was the brightest sun in the universe rising over the rest of his life. He looked up at Julie: *'They want us!'*

Ricki flashed him a smile that said nothing and returned her attention to Billy, 'We can do good things, Billy.'

'Good things!' Sid repeated to Julie.

'Good things,' Rob said.

'Do it, Dad!' Casey urged him.

Kate had always been one for championing the underdog.

'Don't pressure him, Casey,' she said. 'This is a big step.'

'Your father has always gone his own way,' Louise said with a barbed tone. 'All the talk in the world has never swayed him from doing what he knows is best all round.' She stared Billy down over the top of her glass.

'The hardware store was the right move at the time!' Billy couldn't help getting one back in. If Louise was going to play underhanded, then he had to revert to her rules. It was his only chance for survival when she was around.

'Ricki's right.' Sid was on his feet. He had that dangerous feeling again of being behind the wheel of his bus, driving down on Rost caught in his headlights. 'Where do you get—trying to

force a square peg into a round hole. He expanded his arms to the others.

'Golden Oldies,' Louise beamed. 'She led a glorious charge, all sunlight and bubbles, rose up through her, lifting her to new heights, to a place she had never been with Billy before. That's all you get now on the radio! Golden Oldies?' 'Yes! Yes! She was playing a Royal Command Performance! Top of the Bill!

'Forget lunch!' Ricki bit the words. 'Forget Kevin! What you have, Billy,' she was on the verge of grabbing him by the collar but held back for fear of frightening him off completely, 'I want!'

'Our time has come again!' Louise flung one arm high, Shirley Bassey-style and gave her extended fingers a sensual flick, finishing off with a breathy, Monroe 'Ooooh!'

The humiliation Louise's conduct was causing Casey was up there with Billy's roof-climbing escapade and his swim in the gutter. Her only wish in life was to be magically transformed into a five cent piece. Hey! If her dad could be touched with a bit of magic, couldn't she? She just wanted to roll out of the kitchen, out of the house and down onto Newman Street.

'Well, bugger me dead, if it ain't Louise!'

All heads swung to the kitchen doorway, to Reg Conroy.

'Front door was open, so I let myself in,' he smiled heartily. 'Having a party, are we?'

CHAPTER

15

One of the real pleasures Kate discovered upon moving to Newtown was strolling late at night around the narrow, terrace-lined streets, some with lush greenery lining the way, others barren of plant life. Each street had its own distinctive touch, even where the Federation houses were of similar design and construction.

Her favourite part of her strolls came when glancing through doors left open on steamy nights, in being able to glimpse down hallways to seemingly empty houses and hearing gentle laughter or raised voices.

There was comfort in sounds without the necessity of vision, she thought often. It touched a hidden part of her psyche.

Although the day had not yet lost its glow, the moon sat overhead in the dimming sky. Out here, away from the confusion of Billy's house, she could feel the heady mix of frustration, anger, conflicting emotions—*wanting* Billy to grab his rising star—*not*

wanting the dreadful Louise anywhere near him.

The Ex didn't go fishing with ordinary fishing tackle—she used shark hooks to go after her catch-of-the-day.

Reg Conroy's appearance added a surreal layer to an already carnival Hall of Mirrors-like gathering. Kate had noticed his comings and goings outside her salon a few times. Her first sighting had been enough to set off warning bells. She had taken him for one of the salesmen who regularly dropped in to see Billy.

What he was doing in Billy's house puzzled her.

'What're you doing here?' Billy asked bluntly.

'What a sight for sore eyes,' Conroy said, talking across the table directly to Louise.

'Reg ...?' she blinked, not sure she was recognising the right person.

'What a sight for sore optics!' Conroy dropped his briefcase at Billy's feet and made his way around the table, past Casey, to Louise.

'Reg—' she skipped a breath, 'as I live and breathe ... Conroy!'

They embraced.

'I'm a bit tied up at the mo,' Billy said, doing his best to remain civil.

'Hey, does this mean—you'n Billy ...?' Conroy, one arm firmly around Louise's waist, his thigh pressed up against her, gestured towards Louise and Billy. Back and forth. Back and forth.

'Conroy!'
'Sorry, Lu—business beckons.' Reg disengaged himself and, pulling an envelope from his pocket, he handed it to Billy.

'What's this?'

'Only your future, matey!'

Billy let out a breath of exasperation. 'Some people can't be told ...'

'Open it,' Conroy said, nudging him with all the subtlety of a bad TV quiz show compere tantalising a contestant with the dilemma of 'bounty or booby prize'. When Billy didn't move, he grabbed the envelope back and opened it himself, bringing out some folded sheets of paper.

Kate had watched Ricki from the point of Conroy's appearance. Ricki had her bag open and was taking out papers of her own. A contract, Kate had guessed, and by the way Louise's eyes widened, she knew she had hit the mark. That's what the Power Suit gal was there for.

Conroy's entrance, recognition and embrace of Louise ran like a bad movie before Ricki as well as Kate, leaving the record executive immobile, contract held before her, mouth agape.

'Like the man says,' Conroy prattled on to Billy, flapping the sheets of paper in front of him, 'an offer you can't refuse! I've done some footwork—your lease has lapsed. You've got three months to move out. But, I spoke to the Big Man upstairs—Overmyer—and, great guy that he is, he's going to let you stay put ...'

'Stay put ...?' Billy could feel the rug moving inexorably from under his feet.

'That's what I said. Mighty Man's picked up your lease. You stay put and meet your destiny.' Conroy threw one arm around Billy's shoulders and gestured in the air with the other: 'Your name up in lights. *Billy Appleby. Mighty Man!*'

Ricki grabbed Billy's arm and flashed her contract before him. 'Your destiny, Billy!'

Billy's shoulders sagged, eyes moving from one document to the other, then past them to the urgent faces around him.

'Do it, Dad!' Casey said, putting herself between Billy and Conroy.

'Billy ...' Rob scowled.

'*Can't you see what your daughter wants?*' Louise prompted Billy.

Billy gazed around at Kate.

'Nobody else can live your life for you, Billy,' she said simply.

'What's this then?' Conroy looked at Ricki's papers. 'A contract?' He panicked, jumping to the wrong conclusion. '*I was here first!* Mighty Man has the paper on that site!'

'Kate!'

Kate, coming to another corner, paused and looked back to see Billy hurrying towards her. She continued across the street, Billy calling after her again. He finally caught up to her, breathless.

'What's the hurry?'

Kate walked on in silence before finally answering. 'It was getting crowded back there ...'

'You're not kidding.' He fell in alongside her. 'Great night for a stroll.'

They walked on a bit.

'Haven't you got things to do?' Kate said, glancing at him.

'Nothing that can't wait,' he said, his breath evening out. 'Glad to be out of that madhouse. Too much for a bloke to handle in one day. "Morticia" turning up like a bad penny ... Reg-bloody-Conroy hovering around with all the charm of a starving grave-digger wanting to get the burial over with—and a bunch of Newtown reprobates wanting a leg-up the charts ...' He took a big sniff. 'Get a whiff of that, will you—Thai.'

The last thing Kate had on her mind was Thai food—or any other food.

What decision had he made? She was anxious to know, but it was up to Billy to let on where his life was headed this time. No more urging him to *give*.

'Fancy some tucker?' he asked.

'Not really ...'

'A drink, maybe ...?'

Kate screwed up her nose. She wanted to walk and she wanted to talk. *Talk*. Not question. Billy whistled softly to himself.

'Tiddlywinks ...?' Billy said, then

continued whistling. Kate could have sworn he gave a little skip.

'Hi ya, Billy!' Alex, one of Casey's mates, whizzed past on a skateboard.

Billy gave a wave, not immediately recognising who had passed. Kate stopped short.

'Casey reckons you're gonna be a record star, eh?' Alex shouted back over his shoulder, narrowly missing a collapsed stack of recycling on the footpath.

'I can't stand it! *Tell me!*' Kate was fit to explode with curiosity.

Billy stopped a few paces ahead, looked back at her, pretending he did not have a clue what she was talking about.

'Oh, you mean this,' he remarked casually and took folded papers from his pocket. She was still none the wiser. He could have been holding either contract.

'Which one did you sign?'

'*Record stars!*' he said, à la Jimmy Durante.

Kate took the contract, glanced at the back page where he had scrawled—William Constable Appleby.

'Constable ...?'

'Didn't I mention it ...?'

She cocked an eyebrow, one more snippet of personal info for her files.

'You're sure about this ...?'

'It seemed to be the best thing all round.'

'If it's what you want, then I'm very happy for you, Billy.'

Billy studied her, pocketing the contract.
'You don't sound all that chuffed ...?'

'I am. Really, I am.' She thought for a moment. 'What happens to your store?'

Billy shrugged. 'Haven't thought about it ...'

'You have to think about it. Your lease has lapsed.'

Billy's relaxed demeanour spoke volumes.

'What?'

'Conroy and his mates—they haven't read the fine print in my lease ...'

'Fine print ...?' Now she was intrigued. 'What does it say?'

'I'm not sure ...'

'That's as clear as set concrete ...'

'I mean—I haven't looked at the lease since I signed it, but I recall there was a little redback in there ...'

'Redback ...?'

'Spider.'

'*Will you please make some sense!*'

'You know, bugger sits there under the toilet for yonks ... then one day it decides it's going to have some fun. Brightens up and bites you on the bum.'

Kate was starting to get the idea. 'You mean, there's a clause in there ... can be triggered ...?'

Billy was full of himself. 'Something like that ...'

Kate liked the sound of that. The thought of

Mighty Man plomping down next to Anna's flower shop and the New Moon rattled her greatly.

'Gentrification' was the buzzword for the planned obliteration of the inner city areas like Newtown, turning the gritty character of the former working class communities into a representative facade of every other suburb in the country. Where one could not be distinguished from the other. She had come to Newtown to seek refuge from that invidious sprawl, only to find it creeping up on her with all the subtlety of a Stephen King storyline.

'I'm famished,' Kate said, looping her arm through Billy's, heading them back towards King Street and a decent Asian meal.

Something was in the air tonight. Change ...?

'No, Billy ...'

'What's wrong?'

Kate felt like a prime mug, naked, huddled under the sheet pulled tight over her head. They were in her bedroom, in her bed. Sure, there was something in the air tonight and it was *change*—only, she had misread *good* for *not so good*.

The meal had hit the spot. A bottle of vino rounded it off nicely. The chat was enjoyable. Just the way she liked it, about things in general, nothing in particular.

She thought of it as 'thumbnail sketching in

words'. All those random, inconsequential things that are a part of the great quilt of normality people needed to wrap themselves in from time to time for fear of drifting away from what really mattered.

'It doesn't feel right,' Kate said, almost whimpering.

'It feels like it always does,' Billy replied, very puzzled by her conduct. 'Louise . . . ? That's what it is, isn't it?' He had his finger on it.

'No, it's not her.' She was emphatic about that point, at least.

'Bloody woman.'

'I said, it's not her!' Kate bit at her bottom lip. 'I'm all mixed up . . .'

'First sniff of good tidings for muggins here,' Billy was off on a tangent, 'and she's back like a shot . . .'

'It doesn't feel right—even to say it.' Kate's words came back at her under the sheet cover.

' . . . for her slice of the action . . .'

'Billy . . . ?'

'Yes . . . ?'

'Are you even listening to what I'm saying?'

'Yes,' he replied, then after a moment added, 'what did you say?'

Kate breathed hard. 'I said—it doesn't feel right. Not even to say it.'

'Say what?'

She pulled the sheet back and stared hard at him. 'What's not right.'

'Okay—what's not right?'

Kate couldn't say it. She felt like a fool. But, she had to clear the air. How could she carry on a relationship this way? Going around with a sheet pulled over her head? Or a bathroom towel every time she saw Billy? A paper bag?

'What if ...' she forced herself to speak. 'Well ... you know ...'

'I wish I did.'

'What if ...' she stumbled, then the words fell across each other in a rush, 'she's, you know, inside you!'

Quickly, she pulled the sheet back over her head, slumping right down in the bed.

'Louise?'

'Her! You've got her voice!'

'Her ...?'

'It won't work anymore, Billy!'

'What won't work?' His mind was still absorbing the concept of 'her'.

'What we were just doing!'

'That? We didn't get around to doing it!'

'I mean, if we *had*!'

Billy had had enough of this foolishness. He tugged at the sheet. 'Will you come out from under there!'

Kate gave a firm shake of the head under the sheet, holding it firm. Billy dropped back on the pillow, exasperated. A heavy silence fell between them.

'It ruins everything.' Kate chose her words carefully. 'Don't you see—didn't you see how those two ... women looked at you when we

left the Thai place? I told you—we've all got a
bit of the other in us . . . '

'Other . . . ?' Billy chewed the word over.

Kate had been on top of the world right through the meal and was in the mood to snuggle up to her man back at her place when the evening turned sour on her. They were leaving the restaurant just as two denim-overalled women were entering. One woman had a blonde Mohawk cut, rings through one ear and through her nose, a chain linking the two. Her companion was catwalk-thin, denims and top melded to her like a second skin, white make-up and black lips, eyes disguised by black glasses. Hand-in-hand, they stopped just outside the doorway to let Billy and Kate exit.

'Hey, it's Lady Day himself!' the Mohawk said. Her voice was gruff, making Kate think of gargling with broken glass.

'My gal!' The rake lowered her glasses down her nose, black eyes made even more Gothic by heavy black eyeliner boring into Billy. She gave Billy a 'high five' which he returned, trying to shrug off their adoration.

For a split second Kate felt the chill of being on the outside—way, way outside, beyond the castle walls, beyond the moat itself. The chatter between Billy and his two fans was more than your standard adulation. Kate watched in concealed horror as both women pawed his arms, conveying a distinct impression that *he* was one of *them*, asking him, begging him to be the star of

their float in the Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras the following month. The way in which they used their body language, presenting their backs to Kate, sent a clear message to her as to where she stood in their plans.

'I couldn't, girls,' Billy chuckled, 'I haven't got a thing to wear.'

'Come exactly as you are, Bills,' Mohawk insisted. 'You don't need to change a thing.'

'Yeah,' the rake agreed, 'you've got it all exactly the way you are!'

It ate at Kate all the way back to her place, as much as she tried to put the incident out of her mind. What had the couple sensed in Billy that had escaped her until now? The more she thought it through, the less sure she became of where she now stood with him. Was it all surface?

Kate popped her head out, startling Billy.

'Other! I've got a bit of *you*—' she caught herself, 'I don't mean *you* personally, I mean ... you, *masculine*! I went through this!'

Billy started to get the drift of what was on her mind as he recalled their previous conversation. 'Right. And I've got some of ...?'

'Maybe more than we bargained for.'

Billy nodded slowly, the ramifications dawning on him. 'What do we do ...?'

'Nothing.' She thought, biting her lip tightly. 'Wait, I s'pose ...'

'Wait? For what?'

'Until something ... happens ...'

Something? Exactly what did you have in
mind?"

Kate glanced at him. She didn't have a clue.

CHAPTER

16

I never stopped loving or caring—not for a moment ...’

Louise sat beside Casey, stroking her hair gently.

‘One day, you’ll understand, hon ... I know you will. It was hard to go—the hardest decision I ever had to make. But the options about staying were harder still. You spend half your life trudging up one side of the mountain ... only to realise, when you make it, the other side is still there waiting for you to tumble down ...’

Thinking a tear was surfacing, Louise lifted her hand away from Casey and rubbed at her eye with her forefinger, then glanced at her hand. Dry as a bone. She could have sworn she felt a tear. Letting out a world-weary sigh, she returned her hand to Casey’s hair, all freshly washed, blow-dried and combed.

‘I would never have done what I did if I hadn’t been convinced you had the strength to handle it, hon ...’

Casey's face was soft in sleep, her breath rising and falling evenly, two hands tucked between her head and the pillow, the way Louise had watched her every night as she was growing up. Well, every night that she wasn't working club dates, first as a duo with Billy, then, when Billy lost the spark and lumbered them with a... *bloody mortgage on a rundown hardware store!*

Louise scolded herself for lapsing into maudlin thoughts. She had told herself in no uncertain terms on the bus trip back from the west (way, way out west) to keep a tight rein on her emotions. No good was to be had and no points would be won by dredging up the mistakes of (and wrong roads taken in) the past when The Apples were an act to contend with.

Using the benefit of selective thinking, she was able to paint colourful pictures and relive warm incidents of Casey growing up in this house under her care, and of parenting, as one of life's enriching experiences.

Now, as she looked around Casey's bedroom, she tried to draw upon those memories. Little would come to her. In the dim light of the bedside lamp, the wallpaper looked vaguely familiar, the stained wardrobe, desk and chair, too, were set pieces in her depiction of how this room once was.

The intrusion of another recollection pulled a thick curtain across that memory; this hadn't been Casey's room at all. It had been the bedroom for Billy and herself. Casey's room had

been next to this one, much smaller. A cot and a clutter of toys, a chest of drawers with some cartoon animals all over it.

Bloody memories! They led you up the garden path all the bloody time! Made you believe that things had been the way you wanted them to have been!

Louise stood up and gazed down at Casey's sleeping figure. She could have been looking upon herself at Casey's age. Her daughter was no longer a child and in turn that made Louise no longer something she still insisted on being.

'Look at you,' Louise said softly, a small ache inside. 'Just look at you ...'

Bending, she kissed her lightly on the cheek and tucked the cover over her. Once, a long, long time ago, when there were sleeping beauties and when some wonderful wishes *did* come true at the end of yellow brick roads, a lady, not unlike Louise, would tuck in a young girl, not unlike Casey, and assure her, just by doing that each night, that all dreams were possible. A long, long time ago ...

'We all deserve a second chance ... a family again ... Me ... Billy, a team ...' she said wistfully, the mere voicing of the words laying the foundations for the possibility of it happening.

Music played somewhere nearby. A familiar tune. Louise went over to the open window, listening to it drift over backyard fences from a house nearby. She hummed along with it, starting to sway her hips in time to the music.

'Now—I want you to put your hands together for one of my favourite peoples,' announced the lanky TV host, a tangler of words if ever there was one in the rarefied night-time television variety stakes—'The Apples!'

APPLAUSE—the overhead monitor in front of the audience flashed on and off and the hundred or so people did exactly as ordered, bringing their hands together as the studio band jumped into the flash intro to an up-tempo standard favourite. Louise and Billy, his trombone at the ready, were found by the TV camera before a garish set of sparkling, dangling baubles, both moving in time to the music the way the director—at every appearance they made on the show—instructed them to.

'Live telly, darlings! Keep it moving! Keep it moving! A moving target is harder to hit, you know!' Then the guffaw and fluttering wrist to the band leader. 'Do your stuff, doll baby!'

The night air from the backyards below, with their abundant summer foliage, was sweet in Louise's nostrils, at odds with the memory of the heat of the TV studio lights and the stale, muted smells it created. Prompted, she had absolutely no hesitation in recalling every single television and stage appearance she had made in her twenty-six years as a professional entertainer, not the way recollections of a personal nature befuddled her, for instance her mistake in thinking that this had been Casey's room from her birth and not her own bedroom.

Conjuring up the TV variety show on which she and Billy were four-times-a-year regulars, she had no hesitation flipping through the Filofax of her mind and remembering that the show on which they had performed the song now being played from a nearby house was the one on which Bob Hope had made an appearance. By satellite from Hollywood, granted—but she had amused other entertainers over the years with her memories of ‘working with Bob Hope’.

Everyone in The Business (*never* referred to as ‘show business’) knew the ropes. You had only to appear on the same night as some international ‘biggie’, who was kept out of sight of them by a wall of minders, and for evermore you could bill yourself as having ‘worked with—fill in the space’. How those wonderful times crowded her memories—‘worked with’ Bob, Sammy, Liza (the shorthand of it was as crucial in the retelling as the experience itself) and the myriad others necessitating full-name status.

Golden days—before television variety shows took a dive into the abyss. Before the palatial clubs opened their doors to hard rock bands and stars who had barely lost their first pimples (gained from the flush of sweet success of a No. 1 national hit record) and were already jaded in their thirst to found a career which did, to some extent, demand of a performer that they could actually hold a note or two. Before poker machines were invaded, and taken over, by computers that chewed up customers’ money like

rabbits attacking lettuce, draining all the fun and essential exercise, when you came to think about it) out of 'the one-arm bandits'.

The greying of the clubs meant the greying of Louise's audiences and a realisation that, given the failure of one single genius to turn back the hands of time on *anything*—barring the whole ABBA back catalogue—all three had a Use By date on them.

Her last gig at some mining town out in the desert where, she swore, a comedian could still get a laugh by asking, 'Why did the chicken cross the road?', had brought this fact home in aces. Not only had the club been slapped with papers declaring it to be insolvent, but one of the patrons—of the handful she had been playing to—was found, at the end of the show when the lights went up, to be well and truly dead.

Back in her room at the motel where she had booked herself in for the weekend, she had made her way easily through the last half of a bottle of vodka and a couple of cans of soft drink, the nearest she could find to fresh juice out there in the sticks. That night had marked her cruellest humiliation: *performing to a corpse!*

Bad enough as it was, not to have realised he was dead made it doubly unacceptable.

'I have come to the end of the road,' she had blubbered, her mascara streaking her face. 'Now I know how it must've felt, Judy, hon . . . ' she hiccuped, raised the spiked can of orange drink, then stumbled painfully through 'Over the

Rainbow' at the top of her voice until the manager had silenced her, banging on the door. Didn't she know that people were trying to sleep?

'Have you no respect for greatness?' she had wanted to pull the door off its hinges and scream in his face. 'Judy 'n' me! We've been to hell and back! So don't tell us people're trying to sleep!'

Common sense, intruding through the fog of alcohol, had prevailed. She wasn't exactly flush with cash and considering the liquidity problems of the club, the chances of extracting an advance on another booking on her way back to Sydney from Darwin had diminished to the point of zero.

At some juncture in the night, once she had stoked herself with coffee, she decided that a 'runner' was the only way to preserve her fiscal status. The cattle trains roared through that neck of the woods like clockwork, all headed north or south.

Back in Darwin a day later, Louise had spent the next couple of days trying to wash the stink of cattle from her. Emerging from the bathroom after her sixth bubble bath for the day, she had stepped into a time warp—there she was on the telly. Not only her, but Billy as well!

Had she, in reality, *died*? And this was an *obituary*? A fond tribute to a great Australian entertainer? *Arguably, the greatest.*

Watching, the grimmer truth started to sink in.

Her own demise she could have handled at that moment. Not this revelation! Anything but this!

Finding a place for her numbed backside on the bed, a feature piece on a current affairs show unfolded, relating the amazing success—in, of all places, a fleapit pub in Newtown!—of one Billy Apples, former entertainer back there in the dim, dark ages (that was how the reporter made it sound) in a duo called The Apples! Hence the retrospective television variety show clip.

'What's so amazing?' Louise shrieked when footage of Billy fronting a ragtag pub jazz band appeared. *'He's miming to Billie Holiday!'*

What was The Business coming to?

Actors mimed to ABBA records and became movie sensations!

Kids on TV soapies cut discs and became international celebrities! Got themselves leads in sold-out musicals!

Now, aging entertainers (*hardware store owners! handlers of nails 'n' glue 'n' cans of paint!*) mimed to old jazz singers—old, dead jazz singers! (and no matter what spin you put on Lady Day being about the best there ever was, she filled all three descriptions)—and TV current affairs shows fell over themselves with superlatives!

Louise's voice trailed off as she stood at the open window of Casey's bedroom, and as the music outside faded, it was replaced by another sound, cicadas, thousands of them, their shrill

chirping deafening. They seemed to be saying: 'Louise, Louise—your time has come again, don't let it slip through your fingers this time ... Louise ... Louise ... '

Back there in Darwin, the truth behind Billy's national exposure had permeated through Louise's indignation. This was no mime act. This was ... was ... ? *Crazy!* It was Twilight Zone stuff!

Billy was Billie!

Leaving the house, lights still on inside, Louise closed the door softly, the latch locking. She stood looking up at the chipped green plaster, the door that cried out to be stripped and painted, the windows in need of a brisk cleaning, the weeds growing along the rusted fence.

Yes, there was work to be done here, her kind of work. With Billy off on The Love Boat with Ms Hairdressing Salon, she had her work cut out for her if she was going to achieve her goal now—getting The Apples back onto the 'A' circuit ... TV, the charts, concert tours ... The London Palladium? Why not?

Billy, Casey and Louise were going on a trip—to the top of everything—and she had both hands firmly on the wheel.

'Louise—excuse me for saying this, but I feel it is incumbent upon me to say it—you are as mad as a cut snake.'

P.J. Lewis (Percy Julian), was in his mid-fifties, a former club act doing his darnedest to

keep the years at bay with a rug on his head, a sunlamp, and vitamins which he threw back like peanuts followed by gulps of water. As the agent for Louise and a roster of entertainers all with one thing in common—that they had yet to be truly discovered—his life was an ulcerous one.

Either the money from his entertainers was coming in and the horses weren't, or the tips on the nags were coming in thick and fast but the bookings for his clients were not, thus severely limiting his ability to go from pauper to millionaire overnight. A state of affairs that had plagued him since falling foul of the Sydney bookies through the minor oversight of not settling his debts.

'I got acts swarmin' over me pleadin' for bookings,' he said, gulping down a pill and water as he faced Louise across his cluttered desk, 'and you waltz in here demanding I cancel your dates . . . The few you *have*?'

'I've decided to stick around for a while . . . spend some time with my girl . . .'

Louise said casually, using the office as her stage. After all, this *was* a performance, as important as any she had given in her career—a career-making performance, considering what was at stake.

The walls were lined with head-shots of his acts, framed certificates from the various unions and guilds that lent an air of respectability to his affairs, and other photographs of P.J. with familiar faces, entertainers, TV and radio bods, a

former prime minister and another leading identity now serving time in the nick for embezzling umpteen millions from the stock market.

P.J. came from an era when you didn't let a 'mate' down, no matter how far he put the boot into the law. He also had a philosophy which was very Sydney: convey the impression that you have a wide range of friends and acquaintances; you never knew where relationships might connect up when you needed them most.

'Your kid? The one you did the runner on ...' He nodded. Made sense to him. *Sure*. He fiddled with some photos on his desk, feigning interest in them. An act he couldn't place, even working for nix on a charity bill. 'Billy "Middle Eight" wouldn't have anything to do with your change of heart ...?'

'Be a dear, P.J. Cancel my bookings. Throw a few crumbs to the desperates.' She flung a careless hand around to the head-shots.

'Crumbs they will be,' P.J. sighed, his thoughts with a nag running in the fifth at Randwick that afternoon. The tips were coming in again, but the bookings were at the 'feast or famine' stage. Now this bitch was swanning in here like she had a year of prime bookings ahead of her, stealing from under his nose what little hope of revenue he had coming to him, under the guise of wanting to play mumsie! He knew her game.

'Seein's how you're sticking around Appleby Mansions,' he wondered out loud,

maybe you could slice off a bit of the action for your old mate ...? Billy's running hot these days—plenty of work out there for a duo doing the old routines ...'

Louise threw Perc a noncommittal kiss and headed out of the office.

'I'll be talking to you,' she said cheerily.

CHAPTER

17

Grant Rouvray could have stepped out of the Mamas & the Papas only of recent times. His long, biscuit-hued pageboy haircut bobbed with each twitch of the head. He didn't so much look at people as gaze sparingly at them over the top of square granny glasses perched halfway down his ski-slope nose.

'Glad ...'

'Glad ...'

'Glad ...'

'Glad ...,' he said, offering his limp-fish hand fleetingly to, in turn, Billy, Sid, Mack and Jack in the sound booth of the recording studio. Finally coming to Rob, he said, with a hopeful change in his voice: 'And you must be the bass player ...?'

'Piano,' Rob replied, jabbing a thumb at Jack, 'he's bass.'

'Oh ...' the silver lining shrank back behind a cloud on Grant's day. He clapped his hands and said, as if creating the concept for the

first time in the history of mankind, "Forties Salon! I simply *a-dore* it! I hear . . . brass—lots of brass!"

"Sid plays a bonzer trumpet," Billy offered, "don't you . . . ?"

Sid responded with a humble grin.

"I do a fair slide trombone . . ." Billy motioned to his trombone case.

"I know just the arranger," Grant said, reaching for a cellular phone and making brass sounds as he dialled. "Ba-ba! Ba-Ba! Ba-ba-ba!"

Still ba-ba-baing merrily to himself, one hand conducting airily, Grant inspected Rob from the tips of his toes to the top of his ruffled head.

"Have you ever considered the bass? Wonderful instrument." He turned his back to them and said into the phone: "Honky-Tonk! Grant! Listen—I have this act . . ." His voice dropped and he stepped from the booth into the corridor, plainly on a mission of national security.

"Brass?" Rob grabbed Billy's arm. "What's he fookin' talkin' about? We're not Glenn-fookin'-Miller and his little brown-fookin'-jug!"

"What's he on about, Billy?" Sid had a worried look. "I thought *we* were the act . . . ? They wanted us, didn't they?"

He glanced at Mack and Jack, both chewing at the same spot on their respective lips, obviously rattled by the intrusion of other musicians on their music. For the twins, this was a twist of fate they had never

contemplated, a chance to ride the merry-go-round instead of being the mere appendages to it that Twist and Shout and their nights at O'Hara's made them.

'We are,' Billy insisted, *'the act.'*

'Either you tell him, or I will ... ' Rob snarled.

Billy didn't like the way Rob's punching hand was making itself into a fist.

'Don't go getting ahead of yourself,' Billy cautioned, and motioned him to calm down as he stepped into the corridor.

'Ah ... Grant ... ' Billy tapped him on the shoulder mid-conversation on the phone.

'Hold it, Honky-Tonk,' Grant said into the phone and presented Billy with a face of composed patience. 'Billy ... ?'

'The boys—' Billy gestured to the sound booth. 'That is ... I was under the impression ... ' He wasn't very good at confrontations, and it showed. 'I mean ... brass?' Grant's composure was straining. 'We're a unit ... '

'I think we have a bit of a misunderstanding here, Honky-Tonk,' Grant said into the phone. 'I'll come back to you ... ' He rang off, smiling with teeth standing to attention at Billy. 'A *unit*, is it, Billy ... ?'

'That's right—a unit ... ' Billy felt damp under the arms.

Grant gave a resigned look and slapped the cellular closed with a gesture of finality.

'Okey dokey, Mr Apples, let's see what we can do with your unit.'

Brass?'

'Brass!'

Ricki had listened to the playback of the session Billy and the band had recorded the day before. Grant had put down four tracks, then done a mix in which he had done his best to enhance the sound, trying to turn the quintet into a sound not still rooted in the past.

'Listen to that voice . . . ' Ricki said, lounging on a leather sofa across from the sound panel. She had her eyes closed and her head moved in time to the song, a Billie Holiday standard. 'It's her—yet . . . it's not . . . '

How do you spell 'Ricki Patterson. President—Hot Records'? B-I-L-L-Y-A-P-P-L-E-S! *That's how!*

This was no 'one-night stand'. This was *marriage!* And Ricki could see how she was going to take the Billy Apples caravan all the way to the top—not exclusively Australia, either. This was the UK! This was Europe! This was Asia! This was the US of A! This was a condo on the Harbour! Expense accounts at The Places to be seen eating! Cannes in February for the music biz annual, international 'meet-and-greet-you-buy-me-lunch-and-I'll-buy-you-dinner-piss-up-of-all-piss-ups'! This was Top Of The Heap!

'So,' Grant, leaning back in what he called

his Bullion Chair—where he sat and created gold and platinum and (when things didn't go according to plan) mere silver—made an expansive gesture, 'brass it is!'

Ricki's reverie, of never having to take another order from The Freckle, was broken by Grant's thoughtless intrusion of reality. There was no getting away from it: she would have to get the product out there into the marketplace before glad tidings tumbled into her lap.

'Give me the best you can lay your hands on, Golden Boy.' Ricki stood, laying it on thick. She knew how to play Grant like a well-tuned instrument. The kid was 99.9 per cent talent and 200 per cent ego. He needed to be stroked like a pussy cat, day in and day out.

'The best costs folding green,' Grant said, and rubbed thumb and forefinger together at her. 'I'll need the go-ahead.'

'Leave The Freckle to me.'

'Love to. Thy will be done, Enchantress.' Grant stood, bowed from the waist and reached for his cellular, flicking it open and punching out the number. The phone went to his ear and was answered in moments. 'Honky-Tonk! Get out the Brasso—we is gonna *shine!*' Covering the receiver, he said quickly to Ricki, 'I smell plat-in-UM!', and launched into overdrive with Honky-Tonk on how he heard Billy Apples & His Sound Corporation, snitching ideas from most of the current top-selling recording artists from the States and Britain. He knew the dangers in being

an original and steered very clearly to the middle-of-the-road in producing local artists, knowing the money men were terrified of anything that did not have a familiar ring to it.

'How to break this to Billy—how to break this to Billy . . . ?' Ricki tapped her teeth with her glasses, blocking her ears to Grant's machine-gun fire conversation with the arranger.

A giant step for mankind was being taken here, one that would have enormous ramifications on the course of music history—her own place in it included—but, as the man said, 'A great journey starts with the first step', or something to that effect. Right now, the first step was being taken by her approving the budget for a whole big band brass line-up that would run to a couple of hundred thousand dollars given arrangements, musicians, recording time. On top of that, another couple of hundred thousand to market the finished product.

All of a sudden, Ricki didn't feel so hot. A chill ran from the top of her spine down to her ankles.

'The Freckle will have my scalp!' she moaned to herself, going limp inside and hurrying from the recording booth. Vodka! She needed vodka! A couple of straights on ice—that would get rid of the nasties!

'It will work! It will work!' she repeated, head down, rushing along the corridor.

'What'll work?'

Ricki pulled up, looked around, all vibrant

drained from her face. She had been pulled up short by The Freckle's voice, but there was no sign of him, nor anyone, in the corridor. Two vodkas? Make that half a bottle! This time the nasties that came visiting each time she took one of these giant career-threatening leaps—*blindfolded*—from a high cliff, had taken on Godzilla proportions.

'I said: What'll work?' Kevin appeared in the partly opened doorway of an office—the recording studio head's—where he had been in conversation with the executive concerning the sharp increase in studio charges to Hot Records. Things were tight. Hot Records was more Luke-warm Records these days. Where was the Next Big Thing? *Who* was the Next Big Thing? And Big Thing, these days, meant at least one hundred thousand albums to make the exercise worth getting out of bed for.

'Anyone home?' Kevin frowned at Ricki. She showed no sign of life. Maybe he *had* been overworking her, as she insisted he did in one of her too-regular outbursts.

What had happened to the good old days, when you could work some bright, young, ambitious thing intent on being *somebody* in the music biz, to a frazzle—then show them the door and start the whole process from scratch?

'Hi, K . . . K . . . K . . . ' her tongue had next to no movement, so she tried a grin and a wave.

He returned both, meaning neither.

Ricki swallowed as much as she could

swallow and said the first thing that came to mind. 'The lift—it will work this time ... It didn't. Not when I came in. This time—it will!'

He glanced down the corridor to the lift area. 'Worked fine for me.'

'See!' Ricki's voice went up a couple of octaves. 'It *does* work!'

'I'm in here with Dick—we're going over the accounts.' Kev opened the door fully on the studio manager, who was on the phone at his desk. 'Seeing as you're here, you can sit in—it's about time we cut right into the production budget. Put our thinking caps on 'bout back catalogue. Gotta be some way we can dredge up the old stuff. Get our hands on the nostalgia bucks. They can't go on buying ABBA forever! We had singers in flares, too, you know!'

'This would be a good time to kark it!' Ricki told herself. 'Come on, heart, pack it in!'

'You comin' in,' Kev asked loudly from the chair facing Dick's desk, 'or shall we raise our voices so you can hear us out there?'

Ricki found movement in her feet and entered the office, closing the crypt door behind her.

CHAPTER

18

'Up this way, Dad!'

Casey, still in quasi school uniform, stopped along the street in Surry Hills lined with cafes, *really* 'in' fashion boutiques with worn-around-the-edges Third World country 'colour', and haircut places (with groovy names like Fatal Snips and Off Cuts and Razor's Edge).

'Come on, Dad!' She urged him to get a move on.

Billy filled in the dozen or so yards he had lagged behind, coming to a doorway. Casey pointed up a flight of worn stairs to a bright yellow door at the top with what appeared to be a target on it.

'She's on the first ... ' She hoisted her school bag onto one shoulder and started up the stairs two at a time.

'Anyone'd think you was gonna get your picture took,' Billy called after her, taking the steps one at a time.

A month had passed since Billy and the

boys had done the session with Grant and still they hadn't heard the tracks. Ricki told him repeatedly, when he phoned Hot Records, that 'these things take time. They can't be rushed'.

Which to Rob meant only one thing: Ricki and The Freckle had had a change of heart.

'Not necessarily,' Sid said, keeping up a brave face while secretly eating himself up inside: *Dropped as quickly as they had been picked up! The proverbial hot brick!*

Mack and Jack were more positive. Their encyclopedic knowledge of the history of music gave clues to the long and winding road some of the greats had traversed in their recording experience before making their presence felt.

'I'll keep your fairytales in mind,' Rob had responded to their cheerful assurances, 'next time some piece of skirt comes waltzing up to me waving a recording contract!'

'She didn't wave it at you,' Billy had pointed out, 'she waved it at me.'

Rob grunted and took a long drink of stout, grumbling to himself. The conversation had been on the boil after one of their latest shows at O'Hara's, each show more hectic than the one before. By the end of the night, Billy was soaked, ready to drink a barrel of suds.

'They wouldn't just drop us, would they, Billy?' Sid couldn't help being a worrywart. It was in his nature. 'I mean, they'd at least tell us?'

Billy had looked to Mack and Jack for an answer. The record business today was nothing

like it was fifteen years ago when he and Louis had recorded. Twelve-inch albums, for one, had vanished, sending the petrodollar plummeting.

All those Arab nations, so dependent on The Bay City Rollers and a thousand other pimple-blemished talents and not even realising it until it was too late—mind-boggling! And before he had even got around to replacing his old turntable with a CD player, the CD was already facing extinction. They were now talking of buying the latest album over the phone—not ordering it, but actually buying it so that the sound was immediately available by cable linked to your sound system!

What next—a microchip implanted in your head? No sound anymore, only a sensory emotion? It was all going too fast for Billy.

And here was Sid, asking whether a record company would dump the band without telling them. When Billy put it all into context, it was sophisticated technology vs. a pub jazz quintet.

Of course they'd get the flick and never be told!

Surprisingly, it hurt him, making him slightly angry. He didn't like to admit that the idea of getting back in the limelight appealed to him. It was good to walk along the street and have people, strangers even, throw him a wave and a cheerio. More so when Casey was in tow. Each time it happened she would give his hand a squeeze and scrunch up her nose, gripping his arm—sometimes, like today on the way to the

photographer's studio—so hard in her enthusiasm and joy that it hurt. Although he never let on that it did.

The call from Ricki early that morning, taken by Casey who was on her way out of the door, headed for school, had been friendly but brief.

'Billy—Ricki. Things have been so hectic round here, I cannot tell you. Meet me this afternoon. I have something I want you to hear.' She had given him the address in Surry Hills and a time.

'I don't know if the boys can make it ...' he started to say.

'Just you, Billy.'

'I don't know ...'

'I'll explain everything then. Four, okay?' She rang off before he could say another word.

The thought of facing her alone gave him no joy and he asked Casey to meet him after school. Louise had been monsterring her time of late, taking her all round town, playing devoted mother, staying well clear of Billy except when dropping their daughter off or picking her up, which threw him a bit; with his rejuvenated recording career imminent, he had expected Louise to be all over him like the proverbial rash. Apart from asking him a couple of times how 'things' were going, Louise had distanced herself from his affairs. Casey, he knew, must have kept her informed as to the inactivity, keeping the old Appleby 'stiff upper lip' on proceedings.

He had no intention of using their daughter as a go-between to keep his intelligence on Louise up to date. Louise, he was certain, had no such qualms.

For now, it was a case of 'wait and see' how the mop flopped with the ex, adding further to Billy's overriding feeling that his fate was now in the hands of what was, laughingly, called 'the gentler sex'.

Casey, Kate, Louise, Ricki and—most of all—Billie, each laid claim to some important part of his emotions.

He believed Casey expected so much of him now that she had put him high on a pedestal and he was loath to lose the closeness they now had.

Kate kept him at arm's length, obsessed by her crazy idea that he had Billie Holiday inside of him. He knew all about women being jealous of other women, but this was a new twist on a theme as ancient as Adam and Eve and whoever the lady was that came along next. Even though Kate only sensed Billie's presence in a spiritual form, it was enough to stifle the physical aspect of their relationship.

Louise had lobbed back on the Appleby doorstep out of pure commercial interest. Opportunity was knocking, only it was knocking on the wrong door, so every devious cell in her genes was on overtime, focused on redirecting Mr (or Ms) Opportunity to *her* front doorstep.

Ricki was another lobber. Out of the blue, into O'Hara's, building up his expectations then

retreating to the end of a phone. Causing him no amount of grief with the boys—mostly Sid, now bus-less and on limited means to make ends meet. The O'Hara's gig was lucrative as a whole, but split five ways, less tax, less super, less union dues, less the this-and-that the government freely plucked from paypackets, it wasn't so flash.

Lastly, but mostly, there was Billie. Lady Day being inside of him was nothing new. Okay, to all those people who had reacted to it, yes, it was all new. What Billy had in mind—and it had been there since discovering Billie in his teens on a collection of old 78s he had come across while cleaning out the back shed—was the woman herself. Her unique talent. Her sad life, discovered in his search for her story through the annals of jazz history, and the deep mark she had made on music from the time she stepped up to the mike, opened her mouth and sang—'Hey, this is me! Wake up and listen!' Every time he had sung in public, he had dug deep down for a hint of that Billie *feeling* in his music.

Now, he had it in aces and felt as if he had also been granted the turmoil that went with greatness.

What obscure corner of the universe had he disturbed to face these multiple dilemmas of fatherhood, romance, deception, ambition and magic?

It would take a mind far, far greater than his to even scratch the surface of this mystery.

The target Billy had thought he'd seen from street level wasn't a target at all—it was a woman's breast and the doorbell button was strategically placed where it would cause the most embarrassment to a died-in-the-wool blusher such as he.

Casey giggled and pressed the button. Billy pretended to look somewhere else, giving the back of his head a bit of a scratch. The door was opened by Ricki.

'Billy,' she gushed, her energy level at nuclear power plant level. It dimmed a watt or two upon seeing he wasn't alone, though not noticeably. 'And Casey—how lovely to see you.' She stood aside and ushered them in. 'You are not going to believe what I have for you, Billy. Not going to believe!'

She looped her hand through his arm and led the way along a narrow corridor decorated with more 'targets'—tiny, small, big, large and huge. *What was this place?*

Entering a light-filled, high-ceilinged loft littered with photography bits and pieces, lights, a huge roll of white paper hanging from exposed beams on one wall, Ricki acknowledged someone with her back to them fiddling about with a camera on a tripod opposite the white backdrop.

'Billy—Roz.'

Roz, an ungainly-looking woman made more so by her severe, baggy clothes, threw them a smile. Her white-bleached spiked hair pointed in all directions, an outcrop in the middle

reminding Billy of tufts of wild grass in the outback.

'Now . . . ' Ricki stepped across to a sound system set on a long benchtop along another wall, piled high with books inserted with slips of torn paper marking pages; magazines; empty film-roll boxes; personal belongings and a half-eaten pizza which didn't look too bad to Billy, who was always partial to a slice of pepperoni and anchovy and the works.

Ricki stepped back to him. 'I want you to stand—just so . . . ' She moved him back to a spot between the speakers which were secured halfway up the wall either end of the bench. Going back to the system, she pressed the play button and faced Billy, using body language to convey the message: *Be prepared to have your little booties knocked off!*

While Roz continued to fiddle and Casey found a stool to sit on, the opening bars of a big band filled the studio. The tune was familiar. Billy found himself tapping along in a moment, wondering what Duke Ellington's band had to do with the mysterious excitement Ricki had been generating?

The question was answered before Billy had finished framing it.

His voice fell in easily with the band. No wonder the tune sounded familiar—this was the track he had put down weeks back with the boys! Only, there was no sign of them anywhere. That wasn't Rob's piano—nor was that Mack's

drumming, Jack's bass . . . or Sid's trumpet . . .

Ricki was a lens probing the inner reaches of his senses. Bursting to speak, but holding back, not wanting to break the spell.

Casey's chin had dropped, both hands gripping the sides of the stool seat for fear of being blown asunder by the *revelation*!

Grant had excelled himself! At a cost Ricki did not want to contemplate until the moment came when she had to lay all this out to The Freckle, 'the best ears in the business' had propelled Billy into the stratosphere of the 'nineties from the launching pad of Billie Holiday and her 'forties-rooted feel.

Given the magic formula of image and marketing necessary to make The Punters realise they *Could Not Exist A Moment Longer Without The Possession Of This Album*, Hot Records had themselves a winner with a new sound—well, as new as any sound could be given the combination of countless musical influences since humans first picked up a piece of reed riddled with insect holes and blew into it—that was a vital combination of traditional big band and electronic funk.

Time stood still for Billy. He had entered another zone. Not exactly twilight, but in that general region.

Every bone in his body was jumping!

The adrenalin was pumping!

He felt he was physically connected to this bloke Billy Apples, who had been imbued with

the genius of Billie Holiday and (explain this, please!) Duke Ellington, who had gone to join that biggest of big bands in the sky years back, and had hired him/her as lead singer for his gig!

'... Billy ...?' A voice was calling to him from way, way beyond a hill.

'... Dad ...?' Another voice, even further away.

Do you mind! I'm swinging on the stars!

'Dad ...!' Now the second voice was at the top of that distant hill.

Now there's an earthquake!

'You okay ...?'

No, it wasn't an earthquake—just Casey shaking him by the arm. Ricki stood before him, her own high slightly modified by concern.

'Billy ...?'

That's where he was, in a photographer's studio with Casey and Ricki.

What a wonderful trip he had just been on. He wanted to leave again—immediately!

'Well—?' Ricki was anxious for his response.

'We ... we ...' Billy's throat was dry. He swallowed and managed to get out: '... never sounded like that before ...'

'You never sounded like that before.' It was a statement that could not be refuted. 'You. Billy Apples.' Ricki had her arms folded. She meant business. 'Right, Casey?' She glanced past Billy.

'Right.'

Billy looked around, some moisture returning to his throat. He faced Ricki, feeling very uneasy about this all of a sudden.

'I'm the singer ... yes, but Sid 'n' Rob 'n' the twins ...'

'Billy—Apples.' Ricki stood her ground.

'We're a unit ...'

Ricki relaxed, placing a confiding hand on his shoulder, turning him around and bringing Casey into the loop.

'To be brutally frank, Billy, I can't stir up much excitement with the gang,' the little white lie about this being a corporate decision rolling easily from the tongue, 'when I talk—quintet ...'

'You're suggesting ...?'

'I'm not a "sugger", Billy, I'm an *activator*.' This woman could sail singlehandedly around the world in a dinghy, survive alone in the wilderness for a year on birdseed, cure the common cold, but she had never put her mind to any of these things because of her life's quest: taking absolute unknowns and manipulating their talent to the No. 1 spot on the national record charts.

Billy gulped. 'I'm gonna have to stew on this a bit ...'

'We understand, Billy, we really do, don't we?' Ricki brought Casey into the decision-making process and was rewarded with an immensely positive nod of the head. 'While you're thinking it over, can Roz fire off a couple of rolls ...?'

'We ready?' Roz looked up from her camera on cue.

'Shots ...?' Billy was puzzled.

Ricki needed ammunition. The tracks Grant had recorded with Honky-Tonk were the Big Cannon. She needed 'A Look' to nail The Freckle to the wall so that he would sign the cheques with the smell of victory in his nostrils.

'Yes, I think we're ready,' Ricki said across to Roz.

'Gazza!' Roz called to an open doorway on the other side of the studio where an apparition in tight pink jeans, silver knee-high boots, white singlet and buttonless, blousey pink velvet top appeared.

'Billy,' Ricki gestured proudly to Gazza, 'this is Gary, your personal stylist.'

Gazza raised a long thin comb to his tightly clipped, ginger-bearded face and kissed the end of it tenderly. What little hair he had matched the style of the beard. Turn him upside-down and you would have a mirror image of his head. On one ear hung, in Billy's estimation, half the cutlery department of Woolworths. He jangled as he took ballet-like steps across to Billy.

'Well, hi Star!' he said. 'Now, who do you want to be?'

Billy frowned in panic.

'Me'll do just fine ...'

Gazza's eyes undressed him, tossed Billy's clothes aside, burnt them in petrol and let his imagination run wild from scratch, just the way

he had done with his first Ken doll when he first got the itch to remake the world in his own image.

'Oh, I don't think so, do you, Ricksy?' He pondered the task that lay ahead, tapping the comb repeatedly against his lower teeth.

Billy satisfied himself that this was what it felt like to be standing in front of a revolutionary firing squad. There was no one to blame, except himself, once he allowed Gazza to remove his jacket, the way he was starting to do now.

'No one else in the whole wide world, old son ...', Billy mumbled lamely.

'What was that?' Gazza asked, pausing with Billy's jacket half off his shoulders.

'Nothing ... ' Billy replied.

'I thought you said something,' said Gazza as he finished removing the jacket.

'Not a dickybird,' Billy sighed.

CHAPTER

19

Kate gazed around the table, feeling empty inside. What a bunch of partygoers! Sid and Julie picked at their food in muted conversation. Mack and Jack tucked into theirs with the appetite of the young. Rob, his eyes crossing of their own accord, played absently with a spring roll on a plate, more interested in his beer than in eating.

'I'm telling—' Rob started to say, hiccuped, then went on, 'he's dumping on us ...'

'Billy's fixing things for us,' Sid cajoled as he tore himself away from Julie's eyes.

'I phoned the record company!' Rob thumped the table with his finger. 'I told you—had 'nough of this hangin' round—waitin' ...' Another hiccup. 'Demanded to know what was happenin' with us!' His finger went to his chest. 'Stringin' us along. Who do they—' and still another hiccup, 'think they're dealin' with here ... ? Some Johnny-wet-behind-the-ears?' He looked around at Sid, Julie and Kate. The

twins had other matters to deal with and kept their chopsticks clacking away at their bowls. 'Told yer, didn't I say, I told yer . . . ?'

'You told us, okay . . . ?' Kate said flatly, not wanting to believe a word of his paranoia. Billy was different—in more ways than one, when she went over the events of recent times—and she didn't want to contemplate a Billy Apples who would go behind the backs of his best friends, his family, really, pursuing his own self-interest. Sure, he had the voice, but would it have come to him—wherever it came from!—had he not been the kind of man he was? And the boys, didn't they contribute through their friendship and their musicianship to who he was as a person?

'Girlie said, she did—' Rob's eyes wandered again. This time he had a bit of a problem bringing them back into line.

'I know,' Sid filled in the gap with a wry glance at Kate, 'she said Ricki was meeting Billy for a photo session . . .'

Julie's hand went to the lazy Susan and gave it a gentle push, wanting the stir-fried beef on the side closest to Kate.

'Havin' his picture took, see?' Rob used the spring roll to try to bring his eyes back into focus, raising it slowly from the plate towards the end of his nose.

Light from the overhead chandelier bounced off the crystal salt-shaker into Julie's eyes. She blinked, sensing a moment of *déjà vu*—

transcended from this very spot to another place
a time ... only it was the same place, different
time.

A big tadpole wiggled in her mind, wanting
to burst forth, to force upon her a vital detail
about this current dilemma being faced by them
all. As hard as she tried, the taddy wiggled
around and around, content to be a smidgin of
a thing for now. Then the moment was gone, the
salt-shaker spun out of the overlight reflection,
and her hand was on the stir-fry.

'You see me there? Havin' my picture,' Rob
hiccuped again, 'took ... ?'

Sid went to say something. Rob kept going.

'No, course you didn't, 'n' I didn't see you
there either ... nor them,' he waved the spring
roll at the twins, breaking the focusing of his
eyes, and found himself back where he started,
gazing at what seemed like half-a-dozen spring
rolls in his hand.

'Duck looks good ... ' Billy said.

Engrossed in their dissertation on Billy's
actions, they had missed his muted entrance into
the restaurant. Facing him now, with all but Rob
seeing him very clearly, no one immediately
recognised their old china plate.

His hair was combed back, the scraggly bits
gone, his face had a different pallor and the
open-necked white shirt under the grey satin
waistcoat and flash baby's-bottom-smooth jacket
all sat kind of comfortably with slimline pale
denims. Gazza had clipped and primed and

pruned and patted and used the miracle of subdued make-up to make Billy over into a person nudging a mere forty years who oozed the taste and style of a Cary Grant.

His creation was men's fashion magazine spread material. A throwback to romanticism.

A breathing, walking statement that said: I Am Man! Worship at my altar.

Tears had actually risen to Casey's eyes when she saw her father emerge from the dressing-room. Billy, still very unsure about the step he had taken, saw a rare and precious thing in Casey's eyes—pride—and it was the final piece falling into place and pushing him across the line into a new life.

Here, Billy was facing other emotions, and they were giving him a queasy feeling.

The more Rob stared, the less able he was to connect with this stranger standing in front of their table—the bloke with Billy's speaking voice ... the one with another Billie's singing voice! This was all getting too much for a plumber to comprehend.

'Who's this ... wanker ...?' Rob slurred, fluttering a hand at Billy.

'I, er, got ... caught up ...' Billy said, sensing a lack of cordiality among the gathering.

'Billy ...' Sid managed the glimmer of a smile, 'you look ... different ...'

'Different ...' The twins held their chopsticks in midair, taking in the splendour of Billy.

'Billy ...' Sid repeated.

The name did the trick for Rob. 'Well, look who it isn't ... our "mate". Our ... "pal" ... Barry Manilow hisself ...'

'Come on,' Sid used his terse voice, the one reserved once—in his former life as a bus driver—for difficult passengers. 'Billy's putting things together ...' he looked hopefully up at Billy. 'Aren't you, mate ...?'

'Yeah, "putting things together"—for Billy Apples ...' Rob motioned to Billy's clothes with disgust. 'Pretty snapshots.'

'Got room for one more?' Billy smiled at Kate, seeking a friendly face. With no luck.

'You're dumping on us, aren't you, Appleby?' Rob sneered at him.

Billy ran a finger around the side of his collar. Jeez, it was getting hot in here.

'Billy'd never do that.' Sid didn't exactly jump to his defence. It was more a skip and a long stride.

'Go on, Billy,' Kate said, fixing him with a grim look, 'tell Sid ...'

'"Billy'd never do that!"', Rob mimicked Sid nastily. 'Would you, Billy? Go on, tell Sid—"never do that!"'

Rob trailed off, leaving the way open for Billy to deny it. In the silence, Kate's worst fears were realised. She let out a sigh, potent with resignation.

'This has nothing to do with you,' Billy said sharply and regretted it immediately. 'Us!'

'Never, never, never!' Rob stood up, not the

best of ideas considering the condition he was in, and reached out for support, the lazy Susan being the closest thing at hand. Gaining confidence, he gave the lazy Susan one hard jerk on the last 'never'. The salt-shaker went flying off it.

Julie watched the arc of the shaker in slow motion in her mind, the *déjà vu* returning. It hit the wall. The top flew off. Salt sprayed everywhere before the shaker dropped to the floor.

Rob wavered backwards, still standing.

'All I know is ...' Billy found the words he wanted, 'they want me ... for the first time in my life ... *they—want—me.*' He had their attention. This was better than being ignored. 'I feel like ... a door's been opened—something's behind me, saying, "Go on—it's all there waiting for you. All you have to do is ... walk ... on ... through ..."'

'I'll give you fookin' walk on through!' Rob lost it altogether, taking a swing at Billy.

Sid saw what was coming. He was out of his chair in a split second with a cry—NO!—just in time to cop the full impact of Rob's elbow on the backswing, right into his mouth. He toppled back with a groan.

'Siddy!' Julie shot to her feet and dropped immediately to Sid's side, taking his injured head in her lap. 'That's his trumpet lip!' she hissed up at Rob who had troubles of his own to contend with, his swing having missed Billy completely.

'OooooooooHHhhhh! Fookin' hell! Oh!

jeeZUZ! You've broken me fookin' elbow! Oh! Christ Almighty!' Holding his elbow, he skipped, yelped and generally made a scene of being the injured party. Grabbing the wine bucket, he slammed the bottle on the table and stuck his elbow into the bucket and continued whingeing.

Mack and Jack's heads had swung in unison from Rob's elbow connecting with Sid's mouth—to Sid going down—to Julie standing—to Julie going to Sid's side—to Rob hopping and yelping—to the wine bottle being slammed on the table—to Rob's elbow being stuck in the bucket—to the Chinese proprietor appearing from the kitchen, prattling in Cantonese, the gist of what he was saying about violence in his restaurant not lost on them. Their chopsticks still held in midair, they glanced at Kate, her head lowered in embarrassment for her friends and the man she loved, and now awaited the next move in the proceedings.

'Wiggle your tongue, honey!' Julie cooed to Sid, squeezing his head fondly against her breasts.

'Can'ddd—' his voice was thick.
'Numppp ...'

'I'll kiss it better, bubsy ...' She pouted kisses around his mouth and on his cheeks, keeping his head pressed against her.

In spite of the bus that had hit him full in the face, Sid let himself relax and dwelt upon the positive side of this unwelcome confrontation,

any thoughts of how he was going to fill in the rest of his working life the furthest thing from his mind.

'I didn't want this—it was you.' Billy was hurt, not a finger had touched him, but he was hurt deeply. '*All of you!*'

Mack and Jack's heads had swung to Billy as he spoke. They reflected the truth of his words in their faces, looking at each other as if to say: 'He's got a point there.'

Billy turned on his heel and hurried from the restaurant.

'Billy!' Kate cried after him and when he kept going, she rose from her chair and went after him. '*Billy!*'

Outside, on King Street, the night traffic was sparse, a few locals and the restaurant crowd from other suburbs trailing off. Kate looked around and saw Billy crossing the street, anxious to get away.

'Billy! Wait!' Kate shouted, and crossed the street after him. He was making no effort to slow down.

'I hate it, I hate it, *I hate it!*' Kate muttered to herself as she went. This part of any relationship was for the birds.

A lorry appeared out of a side street, pausing to turn into King Street, blocking Billy's way. Kate picked up the pace and caught up to him, grabbing him by the arm, making him face her.

'Billy ...' She was facing a stranger. It

wasn't only the grooming and the clothes. There was a grimness to his mouth she had not seen before. His eyes were dark and seething with demons.

'Thanks for the vote of confidence back there—' this stranger said to her as if they had just met, and pulled his arm free.

'What did you expect?' she said, catching her breath. 'Look—I can see why you're doing this ... but to push us all away ...? I can't find a way to your heart—you've locked it away some place and even you've forgotten where it is.'

'You don't know how it cuts—seeing yourself for years in your kid's eyes 'bout the size of a pinhead ... then one day ... one day,' his arms made an expansive gesture, 'you get a one-in-a-zillion break, 'n' suddenly, you're a giant.' His arms went wider, higher still, his eyes were on fire with this zealousness. '*Somebody!*' He turned and crossed the narrow street, pausing on the other side and shouting back at her. '*It's my turn!*'

'Be mad!' Kate told herself, watching him walk away. 'How could you have been so wrong about him? What he's doing is wrong!' Wanting to get away herself, she headed up the side street. 'Oh, it might work for a while—making himself a big man in Casey's eyes ... but when she comes to realise what he had to sacrifice to get it ... how is she going to feel about him then? Okay, he's opened one door, but he'd

better stop and think about the door he's closing on the people who mean the most to him.'

'What's she talking about?' Billy muttered to himself in his haste to be gone. 'My heart? Lost it? I know where it is!'

A light drizzle fell through the trees. Kate made no effort to seek cover. The wet added to her already-sombre mood. Seemed appropriate, in fact. Ahead of her lay a rambling old church, built in the latter years of the previous century and now almost derelict. Weeds grew around the cracked stone fence, the windows were boarded up.

'Man gets the break of a lifetime and they want to chain him down,' Billy told himself, feeling drips of rain trickle down his face and hang on the end of his nose. He had no real direction in mind and kept going at a brisk pace. 'Barry Manilow! I'll show you Liber-*bloody*-ace!'

Stones crunched underfoot on the church pathway, Kate walking under the wide, leaking canopy of a gnarled oak, around the building to the cemetery at the rear.

'What's she mean—*lost me heart*?' Kate's words bugged Billy no end.

As he asked himself the question for the umpteenth time, familiar words tantalised him; words he had written over a decade ago, the lyrics to the song that had nearly taken him and Louise to the top of the charts. His subconscious sticking its five cents worth in.

He hummed the melody more or less

without realising where the sound was coming from.

His feet, like his subconscious need to touch upon a secret part of himself, led him towards the rear of the churchyard nestled in the back streets of Newtown.

He sang out loud, the heart of his creation matching his determination to prove—if only to himself—that he hadn't lost *his* heart.

Proof ...? Listen! This wasn't Billie's voice—it was another entirely! A voice that had been there long before Billie's. *His* voice. Not the wreck of a vocal he barked out at O'Hara's, but the voice he once had, when Louise and he had first hit the boards.

A voice of rich velvet.

A voice to stir the coals in any cold heart.

'Crikey!' Billy stopped short between the neglected, chipped, leaning and fallen headstones. 'Where'd you dredge that oldie up from?'

Oldie? Sure, but a *goodie*.

At first, Kate thought someone must be around the corner in the cemetery playing a radio. At this time of night? Who? A homeless person? Be serious—what homeless person carries around a radio? It had to be a trick of the ears. Sounds from a passing car ... a nearby house. She was about to walk on when the voice rose around her again. She stood perfectly still, listening.

This was no radio, this was *live*!

She was drawn into a warm embrace, the

kind of effect people said Sinatra once had on couples; the kind that had retreated then mostly vanished altogether from music as the times forced it to become hard, cold and distant. The more distant from human emotions, the better.

Whoever it was out here in the wet night, singing in a cemetery, was gifted with a voice these times needed to remind people of all the good things about themselves.

Kate was hit by another feeling entirely. It wasn't only the voice, it was the lyrics to the song ... they could have been written exclusively for the way she felt right at this moment, about Billy's conduct towards her.

She had to know who it was out there singing to *her*.

Being careful not to make a sound on the loose stones underfoot, she took a few steps to the corner of the church, keeping close to the wall, feeling as if she was taking part in a secret intelligence operation.

Kate was in shock.

Unaware her head was fully exposed at the corner, she gazed upon the mystery singer. Lightning could have zapped her right then and there and she wouldn't have been more startled.

'My heart ... ?' Billy said out loud, turning his face to the drizzle. 'Wherever it is—it feels like ...' He gave himself a hug and let out a delighted squeal.

Forcing herself back before sweeping spotlights she was convinced were out there waiting

to trap her, Kate put her back to the wall in the darkness—*why? how? where did it come from?*—all crowding her mind.

The crunch of gravel getting louder told her Billy was coming this way!

Exposed! She was going to be seen for what she was—an eavesdropper!

Catching her breath midway in her throat, she tried to press herself into the stonework.

Billy appeared around the corner and passed within arm's reach of her.

'Hi, Billy!' Kate prepared herself to say brightly, as if hiding in the dark in an old churchyard was the most natural thing to be doing following a bust-up!

As quickly as he had appeared, Billy walked on, back the way Kate had come, under the gnarled oak, humming grandly to himself, a man who had a secret he was not going to divulge short of the Spanish Inquisition re-emerging.

'You think you know a man ...' Kate told herself, keeping to the darkness of the corner alcove, '... then he goes and muddies the waters ...'

Her emotions were in a state of flux. She loved him the way she had never loved a man in her life. At the same time, she wanted to strangle him—and would have done so with great glee ... had she turned that corner, stumbled across him among the headstones—but *that voice* now stood between her and any intent to commit manslaughter like the Great Wall of China.

Rising above it all was the question: where had that voice been all these years . . . and why had the voice of Lady Day broken free and not this voice?

CHAPTER

20

Had Reg Conroy and Kevin Freckle known each other, they could have, for starters, compared notes on how likeminded they were in their entrepreneurial and philosophical approach and attitude to life (grab what you can and hold onto it like the dickens!). Other mutual interests might well have flowed from such a meeting . . . Billy Apples, for instance.

That a flash hardware chain executive and a self-made music business identity would find their lives inexorably interwoven with that of a burnt-out case suddenly rejuvenated with all the spirit of a newborn colt knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that the Melbourne Cup would be his a few years down the line, would probably have sent the pair into an orbital spin.

The Freckle was shaken—not stirred, the way he preferred to be done over in business.

His first response when Ricki broke the news that she had gone ahead and recorded tracks with a full big band and vocal backings

with Applehead's vocals had been to simply drop her like a hot potato and then sue her for the full costs of the sessions he had not approved. Not to mention the cost of a photographic session with the most expensive camera-clicker in town *and* Mr Pinky, Gazzathe-bloody-Galah's bill, which would bear no resemblance to viable practices of commerce in this life or the next!

Being a man of principle, The G.R. Principle—i.e., no matter what the experts and the bean counters tell you will not work in a fit, if it stirs the coals then go with The Gut Reaction—he had been undone by his own hand.

Ricki played him the tracks, set out the pics of Applehead dummied up into covers of the top mass circulation magazines, including the hip street mags, and ran a video she had whipped together from the snaps and stock footage of big bands knocked off from a couple of musicals of the 1940s.

The Freckle had been schmoozed by the best, knowing full well it was a schmooze and not that rarity of the music biz, *sincerity*, relying at the end of the day on The G.R. Principle. To be faced with *sincerity* from the Queen of the Schmooze rattled him no end—not as much, though, as the next twenty-four hours when he was making the most of The 1001 Ways To Skin A Traitorous Female Executive Alive Without Visiting The Whole Weight Of The Anti-discrimination and Equal Opportunity, et al. Law Down

Upon Your Head—and he found he could not, for the life of him, get Applehead's songs out of his head.

His—*her!*—voice, the quality of songs older than he was that spoke of careless, romantic whims and joyful flights of fancy; big band arrangements kicking goals every beat of the way; Grant's inspired production (okay, so he had been wrong about the lad!) lifted his jaded spirits out of the basement where they had sunk once his bean counters had welcomed him to the New World Order of trying to run a business without the benefit of a few million mug stockholders.

With feet tapping gaily, fingers clicking like castanets and all thoughts of facing mere bankruptcy pushed aside, he awakened, the morning he had planned to give one R. Patterson the chop, completely invigorated!

No, that fell short of this feeling of ... *renewal!*

Reg Conroy, on the other side of the coin, faced disaster on the front that had been his campaign to take Mighty Man into Newtown.

With the copy of Billy's lease that he had managed to lay his hands on and confront him with, Conroy knew he finally had Billy well and truly stonkered. This recording business coming out of the blue had been the icing on the cake. Billy faced a crossroad—he couldn't stay The Singing Hardware Store Owner for the rest of his days.

Conroy had left Billy's house later that night, after a few stiff drinks to celebrate the good fortune that had touched everyone gathered—with the possible exception of Louise—convinced the gods were with him! Who said nice things don't happen to nice people?

How short-lived it all had been!

When his plan started to unravel before his eyes, while parking his wheels across from Appleby Hardware prior to ironing out the details of the handover to Mighty Man, Reg had an inkling he might have acted a *smidgin* hastily. In all the years he had known Billy, not once had Appleby made his move without first thinking the ramifications of his actions through to a maddening degree. One of the very reasons Louise had departed the family when she did.

Billy's master plan of life as a shop owner held no gratification whatsoever for that warbling songbird. Gilded cages were one thing; a mortgage on a shop packed with tools and products she had no conception of the how, where or why of amounted to entrapment, pure and simple. Forget the gilt and throw away the key!

In looking back over his actions to unearth the flaw in his strategic move—okay, let's spill some blood on the carpet here! *Blunder!*—Reg knew he would have to, at some juncture, come to terms with his own failings in, what he would forever call, The Appleby Affair. The way that old soldiers and soiled politicians, over port and cigars in private gentlemen's clubs, chewed on

the cud of their contradictory recollections of that bit of a stuff-up we made in the Dardanelles with the colonial forces'.

Rooted to the footpath, Reg saw that Appleby Hardware was no more. Gone was the faded facade. Gone were the wire mesh windows, with 'Appleby Hardware' in chipped lettering across them. Gone was the clutter of 'specials' out front. Gone was . . . well, the lot!

In its place stood a blazing red edifice trimmed with gold decorations of a distinctively Asian character.

A little bit of Hong Kong dropped down in the main street of Newtown—Teng Hardware!—bustling with Chinese putting finishing touches to the front of the place, others to be seen inside the brightly lit shop, turning it upside-down; all working beaverishly to the sharp clapping of hands and barked orders of a compact, grizzled Chinese woman, who had to be entering her second century, standing on the footpath.

Johnny Teng, wearing the same Hawaiian shirt, old Levi cut-offs and thongs Reg recognised from the first time he saw him, was smoking a cigar and leaning back on a car parked in front of what (Reg could only deduce) was now *his* business, entirely content with his lot in life.

How? *How?* HOW???

Reg's mind raced! His heart palpitated! His knees were mashed spuds! He broke into a sweat! His fingers trembled!

And the noose tightened around his neck!

The third-party clause—the fine print!—he had depended upon ... nay, bet the whole shebang on triggering in Mighty Man's favour, had been turned against him.

Appleby had found himself his own third party prepared to go into the hardware business at a moment's notice!

Any businessman who knows his onions plans on snaring himself a share of the Christmas bonanza. A time when the world must be merry, come hell or high water, is the time when the merriest souls of the lot are those who have successfully reached out and plucked a few bucks from as many pockets as they can.

This coming Christmas—The Freckle swore when driving to the office on the morning of his conversion to Billy Apples—would be one he would look back on fondly as when all *his* Christmases had come tumbling in abundance out of Santa's sack at once. To achieve this wonderful happenstance would require great ingenuity, precise operational expertise and, most of all, enormous rat cunning to cut the competition off at the pass.

“‘Mr Exhilaration!’” Rob yelped, ‘can you fookin’ believe it? They’re callin’ ‘im “Mr-fookin’-Exhilaration!’”

A ‘two-in-the-morning’ mood had

descended over O'Hara's bar a few hours earlier, following a sombre night of little business and a slow slide back to the days of yore when The Billy Apples Band were the last beat to a pulse on the wane.

Rob was at the piano, cigarette hanging from one corner of his mouth, smoke rising to one squinted eye, picking out a blues tune. The empty stout glasses lining the top of the piano crowded out the framed photograph of Billie Holiday, to which Rob hummed in his sandpaper voice.

'If only you knew what kind of havoc you've caused,' Rob thought to himself, gazing at Lady Day, 'you'd turn in your grave. Of all the tossers in the world, your legacy ends up with Billy-fookin'-Apples, 'n' look what he does with it ...'

'You know ...' Julie mused from the corner of the bar where she sat with one hand propping up her chin while Sid cleaned his dismantled horn, '... of all my lives' experiences, my least favourite ... no, top of my I Hate That list, has to be, being dumped ...'

Sid absently stroked the cloth across the glistening brass. 'It's not Billy,' he said quietly, 'he's not like that. Something's got hold of him.' He rubbed the same spot with a cloth-covered thumb. 'Billy's a bit ... discombobulated ...'

Kate, seated on the side of the stage, a glass of white wine at her side untouched, was drawn out of her own private reverie on where Billy

had left them in his recent leap to national fame—approaching the top ten on the charts with his album 'Mr Exhilaration!'—making a topsy-turvy thing of what had been their own, secluded corner of the world.

It had been such a nice peaceful time, when all she had was peace and quiet, and an empty hole in her heart that had been filled by Billy just being there. It was all so different now. She was surrounded by his face everywhere, on the covers of all the weekly women's and popular magazines, in newspaper articles, on the telly being interviewed or profiled by Ray or Jana or Bert.

Billy Apples was an overnight industry, being marketed as if he were 'the new wonder product answer to every stain or nutritional problem or weight loss dilemma' that no one in their right mind would go without for another day.

To lose your man and not see him again was one kind of heartache; to be unable to get away from his image and to be reminded of him every waking minute of the day required the stamina of Charlton Heston playing Moses *and* Ben Hur *and* El Cid, et al., all at the same time.

'Discombobulated ...?' Kate repeated the word that didn't make sense of *being* a word. She felt almost as if she was making it up as she spoke it.

'Yeah—lost,' Sid said, then thought about it, not really sure. 'Kinda ...'

'Scott of the Antarctic—he *was* lost,' Julie glanced across at Kate with all the enthusiasm of a St Bernard facing a tropical heatwave in Switzerland. 'Burke 'n' Wills ... them too, 'n' ...'

'Lost people try to make it back home,' Kate sighed. 'They at least try.'

'Sometimes—,' Mack said.

'—souls aren't lost,' Jack added.

'Remember—?'

'Not at all—'

'They're only—'

'Dozing ...'

'Lost, dozing ... hangin' upside down in a cave in the middle of the bush,' Rob cut in, pausing to drain the last of his stout before continuing, 'who gives a flying fig 'bout Appleseed? I mean, really, who cares?'

Julie gazed pointedly at Kate, conveying her stand on the matter: Well, there's one who cares, for starters.

'Big hit record! Big deal! What's so great 'bout bein' crammed 'tween Elton 'n' Madonna 'n' all them other warblers anyhow? 's not 's if he's the first bloke to ever cut a record, now is it?' Rob was on his feet making a meal of The Great Big Green Monster his jealousy had invited in to board from the moment he had heard 'Mr Exhilaration' on the radio. Followed by some raving idiot trying to convince the poor suckers out there that Billy Apples was the sound sensation of the 'nineties!

'He's the first I've known,' Sid spoke up,

momentarily lost. He had the trumpet dismantled and the pieces set out along the bar on the red towel running the bar's length. *Focus*, he told himself, otherwise you'll be blowing back in before you get the notes out.

'I coulda made any amount of records,' Rob sniffed, 'only I didn't bother. The money's in plumbing—not music . . .'

'Yeah, I noticed how you can never get Rod Stewart on the phone,' Sid said casually as he found the piece he thought he had mislaid and returned it to its proper place on the trumpet, "cause he's always out on plumbing jobs . . .'

'Ahhhh,' Rob waved Sid aside, 'you just can't see it, can you? You still think he's gonna walk through the door—"Hi, fellows! Guess what—we're a unit again! Couldn't make music to scratch m'self with, with all them there slick brass players in their neatsy coloured suits 'n' fancy footwork steps!" You think it's gonna happen—*you really think it is*—and you're more of a mug than I thought you were for thinkin' it!'

'Come on, guys,' the mother instinct rose in Kate again, the way it had in Billy's kitchen that day when their lives had turned inside out—around the time of the Eureka Stockade, it felt like, 'we're not going to fall apart over Billy—we can't let him do that to us!'

'Why not?' Rob gave a pained look of disdain. 'What else we got going for us? I mean, why bother? It's not as if we're being mobbed by

ians pleading with us to keep on playing, is it?' He waited for someone to refute him. No one did. There was nothing to refute. The pick-ups were slim and they were *grim*. From the gathering that night—which could easily have filled a red telephone box—the O'Hara era was winding down to a deathly end. Over. Kaput! Dead as the proverbial nail pounded into the coffin and about to be buried in the deep six.

'Rats deserting a sinking ship,' O'Hara had said in disgust when the effect of Billy's departure on her boom times hit home. The wave that had rolled onto O'Hara's particular shore when word spread of Billy Apples and his phenomenal voice and brought with it the kind of crowds she had been trying to attract for years, had rolled right back out again when her star attraction had put on his walking shoes.

She had received a note from Billy trying to make her understand why he took a powder, and filled in some of the blank spots left in the wake of his departure. His reasoning was that his future now lay with the record company that Sid and the boys had prompted him to sign with . . . only the company wanted him to record with a big band and not with the quintet, which in turn led to this sticky mess where the boys felt they had been dumped. Well, it did give her some idea of how, when you least expect it, a whopping great torpedo can appear out of nowhere and blast you right out of the bathtub.

Now, wiping the bar with a damp cloth.

stacking glasses in the dishwasher under the bar (that would have to go, along with all the other costly items she had gone out and piled onto the credit cards following the explosion of business triggered by Billy's voice), O'Hara weighed up her options, fully aware she was not on her Pat Malone in doing this.

The mood of the boys, Kate and Julie at the other end of the room was not one of sweetness, light and promise. Reading human nature came with the territory of running a pub. Just a glance over their faces in the dimmed light and their body language—mostly heavy sighs, deep breaths of anguish, long silences—was the kind that spoke thick volumes to O'Hara in any language.

Rob returned to the piano, picking out the blues in tones darker than O'Hara could take anymore.

'You're making me suicidal with that dirge!'

'I can get worse!' Rob shouted back over his shoulder to O'Hara.

'Go home!' O'Hara ached to be rid of them.

'Come on,' Kate said, rising. 'Bedtime for all good little girls 'n' boys ...'

'Yes, 'n' who's gonna tuck this little scout in tonight?' Rob swung on the stool away from the piano. The pickings had been slim, slim, slim of late and he was pining for the good old days when he could depend on at least one of the locals on a regular basis and even a new face now and then to keep him company in the wee

small hours of the morning. 'No longer so, no longer so,' he pined, leaving the stage, his leather jacket tossed over one shoulder.

Mack and Jack faced Kate.

'Remember—?' Mack said with a twinkle in his eyes.

'Dozing ...' Jack added with an enigmatic smile.

They winked at each other and walked away, leaving Kate to ponder their meaning.

'Not lost?' she said to herself. 'Dozing ...? Not ... where he is ...?' A door was opening way, way in the distance of her thinking, just the hint of light trying to shine through in the darkness. 'Not where he is ...? Dozing ...?'

'You coming or going?' O'Hara stood at the entrance, impatient.

Kate glanced around. She was the only one left.

'Sorry,' she said and hurried along the bar and past O'Hara.

'Some people don't know whether they're Arthur or Martha sometimes ...' O'Hara said gruffly and closed the door firmly behind Kate.

'Who he is!' Kate wanted to give a scream of delight. 'Not *where* he is! *Who* he is!'

There was hope after all. That voice of Billy's she had heard singing in the churchyard the night that things had shattered between him and the rest of them, pointed to the one question that needed to be answered: where did it come from and where could it take Billy, if he was

prepared to acknowledge it and not rely on the voice of Billie Holiday as the key to his destiny?

As quickly as the pieces had fallen into place, and hastened Kate's step along the pavement, other, bigger, pieces fell out of the night.

Billy did have Billie Holiday's voice, and it must be there for a reason.

If that voice was tampered with, where would the ramifications lead?

Was she better off, for now, leaving well enough alone?

Her nature, though, was to seek out the core of a problem then do her level best to solve it.

Still, the Billie Holiday voice seemed to have appeared—without any logical reason—out of the blue. *Why had it visited itself upon Billy of all people?* Surely there must be at least a couple of hundred million other contenders out there?

CHAPTER

21

Of late, Louise was given to conjuring up nightmarish visions of herself in her sixties, confined to a home for the elderly with only her scrapbooks, kept in a cardboard box under her bed with her other meagre possessions, to remind her that she was once *somebody*.

That part of the vision was barely tolerable.

What made it real Tales of the Crypt stuff was that Billy, now well into his seventies—but with nips, tucks, Californian tan, clothes from the finest men's fashion houses, the weight control, exercise (under the guidance of a trainer to the superstars) and all the other odds-and-sods that went with multi-millionaire success, and looking not a day older than when Louise had first met him—was about as big as an entertainer got on the international stage.

He was *up there* and she was *down here*! To add to her woes, Casey had discovered a talent for singing, cutting her first album featuring a duet with her dad that had shot to No. 1 on the

world charts. An absolute piece of fluff—one of those dreadful, awful things you can't get out of your mind the first time you hear the song. The kind of song Louise would have crawled across a desert of broken glass to get her hands on when she started out in the business.

Of course, Louise was happy that her daughter was making something of herself—but why couldn't she have made it in some other career . . . heart surgery, for instance? After all, Casey had always been good with her hands.

Then her imagination ran riot. One of the women's magazines tracked Louise down and wheedled a 'tell all' article out of her in which she exposed her life's failings and the sense of betrayal she felt—notwithstanding the fact that Billy paid all her living expenses—by being ignored for the great talent she had once been and now having to eke out the last of her days locked away from public view.

Given her 'fifteen minutes of fame' that followed the revelation, she found herself invited to perform on numerous show business variety bills—and this is where the waking nightmare headed at top speed into an abyss!

Unbeknownst to Louise, Casey persuaded Billy to attend her first performance, the idea being that he would walk out onto the stage at the end of her bracket with a bouquet of flowers, photographers at the ready to catch the moment of reconciliation. Billy would then sing a duet with Louise, as they had in the old, old days.

Came the night of the performance, Louise, with a lot of assistance from make-up and wardrobe, faced the packed audience of showbiz glitterati, the band struck up and she opened her mouth to sing and out came the voice of Billie Holiday!

'Mum . . . ? Mum—are you all right?'

Louise shuddered and switched off her morbid thoughts, returning to Casey at the rack of clothes in the boutique.

'Mum,' Casey frowned her concern, the dress held up in front of her, awaiting Louise's opinion.

'Fine! I'm just . . . fine,' Louise dug up her 'put on your best face' smile and tried to focus on the dress.

'You're not up to this . . . ' Casey said and started to return the dress to the rack.

'I'm sorry, hon, I just can't seem to . . . ' Louise fluttered a hand in the air and took the dress from Casey, holding it up in front of her again. 'It's you . . . '

Casey, still unsure, held the dress against herself and faced the full-length mirror, appraising the look.

The truth of it was, Louise had been fine up until ten minutes ago when they had walked into the shop, Casey chatting away, pleased as punch at the latest developments in Billy's career arc. Louise had been spending quite a bit of her time back in Sydney (while she awaited, with a firm conviction, the inevitable career reconciliation of

herself and Billy) in Casey's company, meeting her after school for a milkshake and a chat, watching her play basketball with the school team on Saturday afternoons, dropping by the house some evenings to do the 'mother and daughter' things in Billy's, usual, absence.

Her secret nest egg, spread between a couple of building societies and some shares, and in places she prayed the taxation department wouldn't stumble over, was taking a severe beating—all in a good ... no, in *The Cause*, to find a way to latch herself securely to Billy's ascending star.

A closeness had built up between mother and daughter, slowly pushing aside the resentment Casey had felt at Louise's desertion. Hints of it were still there and Louise knew she still had to work at burying it altogether.

She felt proud of Casey. She showed a bright-eyed independence and optimism that echoed Louise as a teenager.

'... now the record company want Dad to go on tour ...' Casey had said in a matter-of-fact way as they entered the boutique in the city mall.

'Tour?' One simple word and it pierced Louise like an arrow. 'On the road ...? Billy? The clubs ...?'

Casey, already drawn to one particular outfit, gave a shake of the head.

'Concerts ... his own big band ...' She wanted to sound grown-up about this—mature, the way she was treated at school by everyone.

'His own ...,' Louise gulped, feeling a watermelon stuck in her throat, 'big band ...?'

'Back-up singers. Lightshow ... ' Casey changed her mind about the outfit and moved between clothes racks. 'The whole shebang.'

Concerts! *Lightshow!*

This was no arrow, this was a bloody great spear, the kind the Zulu warriors brought down elephants with!

Back-up singers!

A harpoon! Hurlled by Captain Ahab—and Louise just happened to be the great white whale!

And it got worse! *The whole shebang!*

What Louise thought was the 'Anvil Chorus' resounding in her head was, in fact, the store's sound system, switching the entertainment from one of the numerous Jackson singers to the POW! BOOM-BOOM! POW, POW! intro to Mr Exhilaration himself, Billy A. Her bottom lip trembled, the blood drained from her face. It felt as if her false fingernails were curling.

'Mum!' Casey flung the outfit back on to the rack and grabbed Louise by both arms. 'What's wrong? Are you ill?'

Ill? No, my child, it's simply the Grim Reaper pounding on my door inviting me out for a walk in the moonless night amongst the moaning hounds!

Before Casey knew what was happening, Louise burst into tears, pulled away from her and rushed from the shop, nearly colliding with

two teenagers entering at the same time. Casey followed, alarm bells ringing, catching up to Louise between two bountiful shrubs in huge, colourful concrete tubs, keeping her back to the passing parade of shoppers, more than a few with that 'I'm-bored-to-sobs-and-nothing-would-please-me-more-than-to-take-a-sticky-beak-into-a-stranger's-business' look about them. For one of the very few times in her life, Louise did not wish to be the centre of mass attention.

'I'm sorry, hon ... ' Louise sniffed back big tears like she was knocking back schooners, 'I didn't want you to see me like this ... everything's been building up.' She dabbed at her eyes with one knuckle. 'Seeing Billy win it all, while I ... ' she almost choked on the grief of it all, ' ... losing my bookings ... ' She turned away, 'No—I told myself I wasn't going to burden you with my problems!'

'You've got no ... work ... ?' Casey stepped around to face her.

Louise tried a brave face. 'I'll find other dates ... ' she sniffed as she fumbled in her handbag for a handkerchief. 'Somehow ... there's still towns out there want to be entertained ... ' Sniff, sniff, sniff. 'Way out there ... ' And the same trio of sniffs. 'Somewhere ... ' She found an upbeat note.

'Mum,' Casey said and gave her a hug, 'this is simply awful. We've got to do something ... '

'No, you're not to fret,' Louise said,

returning the hug. 'Promise me. Something will turn up ...' She broke the hug, lifting Casey's chin, forcing a smile through. '*I'm fine ... see?*'

Casey had no words. She *couldn't* promise. This wasn't the kind of thing you could cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die upon. No way! Dad had it all and, on the spur of the moment, Casey could think of no reason—putting the past neatly behind them—why he shouldn't at least share it around just a bit.

'The No. 1 album in the country ...?' Billy had pondered the question, savouring the enormity of it all. 'Never ... in my wildest dreams did I ... ' and words had failed him momentarily. 'It's like ... looking up at the night sky and being swept up in all the wonder of a shooting star.'

To recognise Billy's achievement, Ricki had booked a penthouse suite in a city hotel overlooking the harbour, laid on the champers, the nibblies, had Gazza outfit Billy in clothes that screamed: I HAVE MADE IT! AND I'M NOT SHY IN FLAUNTING IT!—and ushered in, in fifteen-minute grabs the way it was done in Hollywood with Arnie and Mel and (the other) Kevin, the cream of the national television, radio, newspaper and magazine hacks to beam the message to all of Australia: BILLY APPLES IS THE VOICE!

Stifling a yawn towards lunchtime, with a dozen interviews already in the can, Ricki

monitored Billy's reply to an alcoholic woman journo for one of the goss-mags.

'People can speculate as much as they like about this gender thing ...' he was saying.

'Yeah,' Ricki thought smugly, 'you should relate to that one, sister. All the goss about you and some of those hot fashion mods you insist on taking "under your wing".'

'I only listen to my fans,' Billy went on. 'They're the one voice that counts.'

'Right on the knocker, Billy,' Ricki said to herself. Mr Humble. Keep it up, keep it rolling.

'I mean, aside from Lady Day's ...'

'Nice touch, Billy,' Ricki smiled to herself.

And a few interviews later. 'Sure there's been changes, but behind all the glamour and glitz, it's still me—Billy Apples ... maybe, it's just my turn?'

'Yes, I like that,' Ricki mused. "'It's my turn ... " Yes, people can relate to that, can't they? How many of us secretly dream of having a turn, just once?'

'Of course world peace is possible,' Billy stated well into the day, to a bright-eyed-bushy-tailed grunge scribe for the leading street magazine. 'But it can only be brought about through love—and the brotherhood of music.'

'Easy, Billy, easy,' Ricki thought, trying to get his attention from behind the scribe. This was walking-on-eggshell territory—let's not get into Bosnia!

'And I say to all those world leaders,' Billy

leaned forward to make his point to the journo holding a miniature cassette recorder up to him, 'stop and smell the roses—listen to the music . . . my album,' he picked up a CD from the side table, '*Mr Exhilaration* is a pretty good place to start . . .'

'Okay, Billy,' Ricki said to herself, 'I'll buy that.' God, her feet were killing her. Standing around for nine hours, being nice to people she would not ordinarily communicate with on a personal basis—they were all out hunting, searching ravenously for prey, someone, anyone, to tear, shred, rip apart in the glaring light of the public eye—was an achievement comparable to forging a flooded river . . . upstream.

The Freckle was going to be delirious once this blitzkrieg hit—more so than he was already, busily counting the profits piling up on a triple gold album. Billy's national exposure over the next fortnight, leading up to Christmas, would push sales into quadruple gold. His debut concert in Sydney would be followed by further shows in all the capital cities and major country areas, adding further to the sheckles that, Ricki knew, were being siphoned off into various Keep Kevin In The Style To Which He Has Become Accustomed Funds.

Already, Kevin was in discussion with one of the leading international labels eager to test Billy's little toes in the far greater pond where sales came in the millions not the hundreds of thousands.

Grant had been instructed to get a second

album into planning, to be cut early in the new year ready for May and the Mother's Day market. Kev already had the title—*I'll Do Beautiful Things To Your Heart*—and cover art roughed out, marketing campaign in the works.

Ricki had never known him to take to her concept of forward planning with such gusto. Usually, The Freckle heard an unknown band, signed them up every which way that was legally possible, stuck them in a recording studio for a week or two and, with finished product in hand, sat down and scratched his head—sometimes until it nearly bled with the despair of seeing his hard-earned readies fly off into the wild blue yonder—wondering how to sell 'The next Beatles! *I swear!* The next!'

Kev's instructions to Ricki to 'make this a one-night stand' as far as Billy's recording career with Hot Records went had been cancelled. The go now was: 'We're in the Apple business for the long haul!'

'Next!' Billy said out loud, snapping Ricki out of her momentary daze.

She looked around, seeing the last of the hacks leaving, then glanced at her watch.

'That's it, Billy. Done.'

'Like a dinner, eh? How'd I do?'

'Knockout.'

'Only knockout?' He sounded disappointed. Ricki could never tell if he was serious or not about his ego.

'Championship knockout, not welter-weight,' she said quickly, giving a swing with her fist in the air in his direction.

'I didn't realise I was such an interesting bloke ...' He removed his loosened tie and ruffled his hair with a lopsided grin, making him look even more boyish than Gary's predetermined look.

'You're ... Cinderella ... The Ugly Duckling ...' Ricki dropped back into the chair, still warm from the last hack's backside, and removed her shoes.

'Cinderella *and* The Ugly Duckling ...?'

'... the public love this "second chance" thing ...' Ricki rubbed at the sole of one foot, relishing the pain she was inducing upon herself. 'It's worth its weight in plutonium, Billy. They don't just buy ...'

'The voice,' Billy cut in. 'I know ... you've told me often enough. It's all the other baggage an artist—'

'Or his management,' Ricki interrupted, changing feet.

'—brings to the table,' Billy finished off.

'You mightn't agree with it, Billy, but that's the way it is—the way it's always been. People buy dreams. That's all. Whether it's a CD, go to a movie, hire a video, buy a new outfit ... it's all just ... aaaaaahhhhh,' Ricki let go of her foot and leaned back in the chair, '... dreams ...'

'Call me Mr Sandman,' Billy grinned.

'Uh, uh,' Ricki waved a finger at him. 'You

don't put people to sleep, you awaken them. That's your gift, Billy. You put them in touch with something inside here,' she touched her heart. 'Something they forgot was there.' She was about to stifle a yawn. Instead, she let it out.

Billy stood and took her hand, gesturing for her to stand. She did so and he indicated the long sofa.

'Get yourself some sleep.'

'What'll you do? I had dinner planned ...'

'I'm headed home. Talkin' can take it out of you ...'

Ricki gazed at the sofa. It was just too inviting. She dropped onto it and grabbed one of the pillows, placing it under her head at one end.

'... room's paid for ...' she said sleepily, '... might as well ...'

Billy picked up his jacket and tie and left, being careful to close the door quietly behind him.

In minutes, Ricki was off down that yellow brick road Billy sang of in his hit 'Mr Exhilaration', Emerald City sparkling on the horizon, her future in The Biz assured. Billy Apples was her biggest break yet—but, she was certain, he was the first of many to come.

The Patterson Empire—the most dazzling of all the towers in Emerald City—was going to be built on the rock-solid foundation of one voice. And the day would come when she would look down, down, down on The Freckle, there at the

front door, pressing the buzzer frantically, demanding to be let in.

'I made you what you are today! You owe me!,' he screamed, but Ricki was deaf to him. Bliss!

Billy stepped into the lift, straight into three fans—a grandmother, mum and daughter on holidays from interstate. They insisted on his autograph and touched his sleeve as he signed on the way to the lobby, where he was released only momentarily to his own devices until he reached the door being held open by a young doorman who asked if he, too, could have an autograph for his girlfriend.

The limousine Ricki had waiting returned him to Newtown, for a quiet night in front of the telly, one of the few of recent times, which he now treated like rare jewels in his hectic days.

Hardly a minute to himself anymore, and it was probably best that way.

The less time he had to himself the less time he had to think, and take the risk of letting his mind drift to other matters ... such as, for instance, matters of the heart.

'... every time I get the feeling that I'm over you ...' he sang softly to himself in the back seat of the limo, then, realising what he was singing and where the words to the song could lead his thinking, he shut up and thought about the couple of pork chops sitting in the freezer and wondered if Casey would be home or out somewhere with Louise.

The mere thought of Louise niggled at him. By the time he was on his way through the heavy city traffic towards Newtown, that single thought had become the dreaded single thread that, if tugged, would start to unravel the whole tapestry.

CHAPTER

22

Coming down the stairs past the bathroom the following morning and doing her usual battle with the clock, Casey paused at the bathroom door.

She was stopped by a voice coming from the shower. Singing. Wrapped up in her own thoughts—to do with Louise and how she was going to approach Billy with the idea she had to make her part of his show—the first thing that came to Casey was that there was a strange man having a shower in their bathroom!

'... the memories come stealing through the heart of me ...' the stranger sang, 'I had too much to love last time ...'

Being as quiet as she possibly could, she tiptoed back up the couple of stairs and was about to retreat to Billy's bedroom to knock softly on his door and alert him to the fact that there was an intruder in their shower, when the bathroom door opened and Billy stepped out in his bathrobe. The fluffy white one she

had given him for his birthday recently.

'Dad ... ?' Casey frowned.

'That's me,' Billy said chirpily, stepping past her, rubbing his hair with a towel, humming the tune she had heard behind the bathroom door.

'That was you in there ... ?' Casey looked from Billy to the empty bathroom, steam drifting out through the door.

Billy paused at his bedroom door and looked at her quizzically. 'Who else would it be?' Casey had no answer. He stepped into his room, then poked his head out as she was about to continue down the stairs. 'What's the chances of a couple of poached googs? On toast?'

'Pretty good,' Casey replied happily, the right moment to get the matter of Louise over with dropping conveniently into her lap.

She hummed the rest of the way down to the kitchen and while she prepared Billy's favourite breakfast of two eggs, poached, with a thin slice of tomato on top, tomato sauce on top of that, all placed on fresh wholemeal toast—unaware that the tune she had heard coming from the bathroom was imprinted indelibly on her mind and that it had been there since the time of her birth.

Fifteen minutes later, facing Billy across the table as he wiped up the last of his eggs with a piece of extra toast, Casey said, 'Dad ... ?'

Billy took a drink of tea and nodded.

'I've been thinking ... ' Casey played

absently with her cup of tea, not able to immediately look him in the eye for fear of giving herself away.

'Good—thinking's good,' he said and pushed his plate away. 'Beaut eggs, Case.'

'Good—eggs are good ... ' Casey said without thinking.

Billy raised one eyebrow, on alert—*Red alert*. Something was up. A Big Something. Thinking, you said ... ?'

'You did say thinking was good,' Casey jumped in.

'Depends what kind of thinking you're thinking,' Billy said warily, trying to read the warning signs.

'... along the lines of ... ' Casey had to get this over with. 'Your show ... that kind of thinking ... '

'My show ... ?'

'Your show ... yes.' She took a quick drink of tea. It was cold.

'And in which direction would your thinking 'bout my show be headed?'

Casey bit at her bottom lip, unable to stop herself from frowning. Unable to stop her body language from saying all kinds of bad things. Unable to stop her legs from crossing and uncrossing under the table.

'Dancing under the table, are we?' Billy poured himself another cup of tea. A strong one. He had an inkling he was going to need it. 'Full of beans this morning ... '

Casey grimaced, squeezing her eyes shut, both hands turned into fists on the table in front of her and her whole body rigid.

'Dad *I really think* it's awful you've got *all this success*—No, I don't mean it that way, *awful* I mean, *what I really mean is* . . . !'

Billy's head spun! He knew he was seated at the breakfast table but he felt as if he was riding a roller-coaster on a merry-go-round inside a hall of crazy mirrors. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle, pulling Casey up short and sharp. One eye opened and peered across the table at him.

'I got the "Dad" bit there, but the rest? Sounded like humans' first contact with an alien race.' Billy let out a long, acknowledging sigh. 'Look, this is about your Mum, isn't it . . . ?'

'Oh, Dad, I knew you'd understand,' Casey breathed relief.

'Understand *what*?'

'You just said . . . '

'I get the general idea—it's the "minor" detail's a bit on the fuzzy side.'

This was it. Casey had unlaced the boots, now it was time to drop them. Both at the same time.

'Mum—well, you could . . . ' she paused a second. 'You did say, now that things are on the up, I could have anything my heart desired.' This was *really* pushing the friendship and Casey knew it! 'Your concerts . . . ?' Another pause. This was it. 'Back-up vocalist . . . ?'

Billy stared—and stared . . . and stared even harder at her. Finally, he broke his concentration and acted as if everything was perfectly normal at the breakfast table.

‘Pass me the sugar, thanks.’

Casey didn’t move.

‘The sugar . . . ?’

‘Oh . . .’ She snapped out of it, ‘Right—sugar . . .’

She passed him the bowl and watched, mesmerised, as Billy proceeded to spoon sugar into his cup of tea, one after the other after the other after the other after the other after the other, not taking his eyes from her. Smiling peacefully, he stirred the sugar, the spoon moving sluggishly in tea that must be turning to syrup. Raising the cup, with one pinky sticking out in the royal fashion, he took a sip and returned the cup to the saucer.

‘Dad, say something,’ Casey prompted him. The suspense was unbearable.

‘Say something?’ he echoed, then looked outside through the window above the sink. ‘Looks like a nice day coming up.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Look at the time. You’re gonna be late.’ He rose from the chair. ‘Things to do myself.’

With Casey watching his departure, he left the kitchen and she listened to his footsteps going up the stairs. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Then a door closed, sounded like his bedroom, followed by a hollow silence.

'AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!'

Casey jumped in her chair at Billy's muffled scream of frustration filling the house. If she *did* live long enough to tell this tale to her grandchildren, she would swear to the lovelies on a stack of Bibles that the house actually shook on its foundations.

'You haven' ... ?'

'No ... it's just that ... you know ...' Casey had been put on the spot by Kate, running into her in the street and being asked why she hadn't been around to say hi. Had she been evading Kate?

'No, not at all,' Casey insisted. Thinking about it, though, she probably had been avoiding Kate, even if only subconsciously. It was all new to her, this stuff about men and women and relationships. One day there's Two—then there's *Two Ones* ... and those Two Ones multiply off into *Two Twos* ... and, she guessed, somewhere along the line *one* of those Two Twos broke up and the *new* Two Ones eventually coupled up into *another* Two Twos and on it went.

'Busy, I guess,' Kate said matter-of-factly, studying Casey's reflection in the wall mirror opposite the chair in the New Moon. 'Billy's schedule must really keep you on the go ... ?'

'Mmmm,' Casey agreed, not feeling entirely comfortable. Kate had insisted she come back to the New Moon and let Kate do something with

her hair. 'Mum too . . . I mean, being around for as long as she has been . . . getting to know each other a bit better . . .'

Kate didn't appear to be listening now. She picked up the scissors and started to snip around the back of Casey's hair.

'Dad's bought me a new outfit for his big show . . .' Casey said. Kate didn't appear to hear. 'Off the shoulder . . . a bit!'

'That's nice,' Kate replied absently.

'Wasn't too pleased,' Casey said. 'Said it was too old for me.' She made an all-knowing face. 'Men!'

Julie returned to the salon carrying a cardboard tray with two coffees.

'Hi, stranger,' she flashed a glimmer of a smile at Casey, putting the tray down on the counter. 'Where've you been hiding?'

'Why does everybody think I've been hiding?'

'Casey's had lots on her plate,' Kate said, for Casey, turning her head an inch or two, appraising the line of the cut.

'I want to look the best for Dad's show,' Casey said, still on the subject of the new dress, then glanced up at Kate. 'You would, wouldn't you?'

'I would—what?'

Until that moment, Casey had not seriously contemplated this whole Two Ones, etc., and where it might be taking Billy and Kate. They had been a Two—a nice Two into the bargain—

and now they were Two Ones. Mum was a One too, but the likelihood of her and Billy being a Two again wasn't something Casey needed to contemplate. Loving them as much as she did—although, until her mother had shown up again she had not realised that love and her mum were interconnected—Casey had to face facts: they might once have been meant for each other, but not anymore.

'I think,' Julie said, placing a coffee down on the workbench in front of Kate, 'Casey is on a fishing expedition . . . ' She gazed knowingly at Casey who eased herself lower in the chair.

'Sit up, Case, or you'll end up with a fringe as straight as my elbow.' Kate glanced at Julie. 'Fishing . . . ?'

'Billy's concert?' Julie licked frothy chocolate from her finger with a sinful grin. 'Are you going? That kind of fishing?'

'Is that what you were trying to find out, Case?' Kate bobbed the side of Casey's hair with both hands.

'Kind of . . . ' Casey wanted to be elsewhere. Billy was right—yet again!—grown-up clothes and lipstick and make-up and high heels don't necessarily mean you're ready for the complexities of an adult conversation.

'Given the circumstances, Case,' Kate picked up her coffee and took a drink, 'I don't think it's on the cards.' She put the coffee aside and returned to Casey with the scissors. 'I wish Billy the best in the world—I really do . . . but

he's moving in a different world now ...'

'More like a different universe,' Julie added, patting the back of her hair, as if she were preening herself.

'Still seems the same to me. I mean, Dad's hardly ever there and yet, I don't really miss him 'cause he's everywhere, you know ... But when he is there, I mean, home, it's still the same as it always was.' Casey frowned. Was this making any sense? Probably not. 'Only ... it's different ...?'

'Yes,' Julie said, taking on a look of bemused concentration, 'it's been different for us, as well.' She gave Casey a pointed twitch of the nose and stepped away.

Kate had her back to Casey, looking for something on the workbench.

Casey bit glumly on her bottom lip, then started humming to herself. It was the only sound in the salon apart from the muted traffic passing along King Street.

The tune she hummed was a part of her—unlike any other tune she had heard, because she had been in her mother's tummy when the song had hit big (well, pretty big), and just as she had been picking up bits 'n' pieces of her parents along the pathway to being delivered into the world, she, too, without knowing it, was already tapping into their environment, becoming musically minded.

A long minute passed before Kate realised she, too, was humming the same tune. Turning

slowly she faced Casey, who was still humming, checking out her new cut in the mirror.

'Is that ... one of Billy's songs?'

Casey stopped, glancing at Kate. 'Mmm ... I guess so. He's been singing it in the bathroom quite a lot lately.' She picked at her new fringe.

'Don't do that,' Kate gave her hand a gentle smack. 'I haven't done with you yet.' She faced Casey. 'Singing it, you say ... like ... ?' She had to stop and think a moment. '... I had too much to love ... last time ... ?'

'That's the one. Only ...'

'Yes ... ?'

'It sounds nothing like Dad. Not a bit.'

Kate tried to contain her building excitement. 'It sounds like there's this other voice in him?'

'Other voice? You mean the Billie ... ?'

Kate gave a shake of the head. She had to hear this from Casey's own lips.

'No, nothing like Billie. This voice was ... ?' Casey had to stop and sort out the words in her head. 'Like ... ? Well ... ? Deep, and ... ?' Now, the more she thought about it, the only response she could come up with that did this other voice of Billy's justice was—a great, big grin.

'Yeah!' Kate beamed. 'That's the one I mean!'

'Billy's big hit,' Kate said, facing Mack and Jack

behind the counter of Twist and Shout. 'You know exactly what I'm talking about . . .'

Casey and Julie had been hustled out of the New Moon only minutes earlier following Kate's joyous burst into action and were still not sure what this was all about. They hung back, waiting to see how this whole mystery of hers played out.

'Big—' Mack queried Jack.

'—hit . . .?' Jack mused, scratching his chin.

Despite sharing Sid and Rob's feelings of betrayal at the way they had been dumped by Billy, there was still a part of them that couldn't help but stay loyal to him.

'We can do this one of two ways, boys,' Kate insisted, taking on the air of someone prepared to roll up their shirt sleeves and cause bumps to a few uncooperative heads. 'You can cough up what you know about this here "hit"—"Too Much To Love" or whatever it's called—or I am going to . . .'

'No violence!' Mack shrank back.

'We can't—' Jack whimpered.

'—stand violence!' The two echoed each other.

'Who said anything about violence?' Kate was miffed. 'I was going to say: cough up or from now on, find yourself another hairdresser . . .'

Mack looked at Jack and Jack looked back at Mack, both raising a hand to their hair. Kate did a terrific job. There was no one else. They sighed in unison.

'I had too much to love, last time . . . ' Billy's voice crooned on a 45 rpm on the turntable within minutes. Kate, Casey, Julie and the twins stood near the overhead speakers and listened in silence.

Finally, Casey nodded. 'A bit older, but that's the voice all right.'

Kate clapped her hands loudly with joy. 'Not lost at all! See!' She looked around to everyone. 'Dozing!' Facing Casey, she grabbed her by the shoulders. 'You want the best for Billy, don't you, Case? *The very best?*'

As far as Casey, Julie and the twins were concerned, Kate was off her rocker—crazy, nuts, and troppo to boot!

'Okay,' she had retorted, 'who's got a better idea?' Silence from them. 'We do want the same thing, don't we?' Silence still. 'Things to be the way they used to be . . . ?'

Chewing that one over, they had to agree that they did. Even Casey threw her hat into the ring with them. *Now* was great, terrific . . . but *then* was . . . ? To be honest, it hadn't been flash, not with Dad and the hardware store, but Kate insisted this wasn't about the hardware store. That was gone. Done with.

This was about something much more important. About Billy finding his heart.

His true self.

Not trading off someone else's voice.

And what Kate had in mind couldn't be done unless everyone was in on it. Casey most of all.

There was something about them all being a kind of family before that Casey was missing. Only, she hadn't realised it until now, when Kate needed 'the family' to bring Billy back to what he had lost along the way.

Now, the five of them were piling out of a taxi and tumbling through the gates of the bus depot in search of Sid who had returned to the bosom of the city transit system when his dreams and ambitions—as Julie had said with such eloquence—had been dashed, like the hopes of Ulysses' men, on the rocks where the sirens of success had beckoned him.

Lost Property lay in the bowels of the main office building, along, down, through, up, and down again and through once more and around *and* along, the light moving from natural to fluoro to light bulb to 'feel your way with great care', back to something resembling natural and another light bulb, this one with about the power of a shonky torch battery.

The air became more tepid as the hearty band journeyed onwards, finally arriving at a darkened doorway marked 'Lo-t Pro-rt-', the key letters having dropped off way, way back there in yesteryear.

What Casey mistook for the form of an Egyptian mummy behind the counter was in fact the very person they had come to find. Sid had

heard the footsteps long before anyone had appeared at the far end of the last, narrow corridor, and his heart skipped beats in expectation.

Someone was actually interested in picking up a piece of property lost on one of the city's buses and foolishly handed in by a driver!

He had been told, by Rost, when he crawled back, literally on hands and knees, begging to be reinstated, that any chance—slim, slim, slim! as it might be—of him ever sitting behind the wheel of a bus again this side of retirement depended on how he conducted himself in 'solitary', as Lost Property was, 'fondly', described by the drivers.

Closer . . . closer . . . closer still, came the footsteps until they had taken the form of living, breathing, moving human beings!

What could it be they had lost? Sid thought hastily of the meagre items on shelves covered in tiny cobwebs. The Vegemite jar full of old pennies was a possibility, as was the tea towel wrapped around something squashy and terribly smelly (Sid suspected it was a Christmas cake), and the pair of shoes with socks scrunched into them. But all thought of interacting with some stranger over these or any other items vanished when five familiar faces stepped through the doorway and shared the same dim light.

'Hi, gu . . . ' Sid started, but didn't fully get the 'guys' out, or ask the one question he had been waiting one fruitless day after another to ask: 'How can I be of assistance?'

'Sid, we're gonna put things back the way they were!' Kate stated with such conviction that he felt a rush of memory and a warm glow that took him back to when he was a tyke and things had got out of hand and Mum or Dad stepped in and took charge and you just knew that, yes, things *were* going to be put back the way they were.

Listening to the babble of voices outlining The Scheme, (er, crazy, nuts, troppo, off the planet and toss in loopy for good measure) and The Reasoning behind it, it occurred to Sid that he had outgrown one family only to find himself in the bosom of another.

This one, just possibly, certifiably insane.

'I'm an oak! Not a fookin' maple bending each time someone walks by and lets out wind! I stand alone on the fookin' hill!'

Looking more like something that had walked out of a swamp creature movie than the Rob McSpedden they knew and loved (on a good day—the loving moving more towards loathing, on the bad), Rob stood in a rusted bathtub in a bathroom of chipped tiles and peeling plaster doing battle with a plumbing system designed by Moses himself.

Only minutes before The Six On A Mission had entered the house (after being directed to it by his message service), one of the pipes had given way under his wrench—an action that

had taken most of the morning to accomplish—and brown and blue stuff, the essence of which he did not want to contemplate, had blurted from within and sprayed him from head to waist.

'Oh . . . poooooooooh!' the Six had chorused on entering the bathroom to find him dripping gunk, the blurt from the pipe now down to a trickle, the monkey wrench gripped in his hand ready to do severe injury to the offending plumbing. Their fingers and thumbs had gone to their noses in a move any ballet choreographer would have been pleased to stage-manage.

The revelation of what they had come to lay upon him was made in a nasally musical fashion, each of the Six piping up some part of the suggestion by releasing—for just a second or two—the pressure they were placing upon their nose.

Thus, once enlightened as to Kate's scheme (Crazy! Nuts! Troppo-and-so-on), Rob had drawn upon metaphors to do with trees of the oak and maple variety, and wind, by the hand of nature and man-made, to let them know he was not in the least interested!

'We're gonna do it!' Sid declared, fully releasing his thumb and finger.

'By heck—' Mack did likewise.

'—we are!' Jack added, his digits similarly released.

'That's your business—and none of mine,' Rob said as he wiped a hand down the back of his hair, feeling things, tiny things with crawly

feet, already mobile there. 'He dumped on us!' 'Okay, he dumped on you,' Kate let go of her nose and wished she had not been so hasty. 'We've all been dumped on some time or the other. You're not in some exclusive "I'm-The-Only - Person - In - The - World's - Ever - Been-Dumped-On" Club, you know. Billy needs us.'

'You know that for a fact, do you?' Rob stepped out of the bath. They all took a step back, as one.

'Kate says he's dozing,' Sid stated.

'Dozing?' Rob sneered. 'He's got a fookin' strange way of showin' it—dancing all over the bloody telly every time I turn it on.' He did a strange movement from the hips, waving his arms and hands around like a hula dancer, splattering them with specks of the gunk.

'Ugh!' Julie slapped at the gunk on her dress. 'Be careful! You never know where that stuff's been!'

'That's where you're wrong,' Rob grinned, 'I do know where it's been. Would you like me to enlighten you?'

'You're disgusting!'

'All right, you two,' Kate interceded, then concentrated on Rob. 'So, you want to be the odd man out, is that it?'

'I didn't say that,' Rob said haughtily. He had to be careful here. What Kate had dreamed up was brilliant! It would knock the socks off a few people, that was for certain, not the least of them Billy Apples, and he'd hate to miss out on

the fun. The trick here was to make them sweat a bit.

'We haven't got time to waste,' Kate said strongly, as if reading his intentions. 'You're either in, or you're out, Rob.'

'And if you're in,' Sid added, feeling his oats, 'it's on one condition: you have a bath in Old Spice or somethin'. I'm not going on stage with you smelling like that.'

'That goes—' Mack piped up.

'—double for—' Jack said.

'—us!'

'You do realise,' Rob scratched at the gunk starting to dry on his face, 'we'll more'n likely end up behind bars for this little escapade.'

That chance alone was enough to commit him to becoming the last member of The (now) Magnificent Seven On A Mission To Save The Heart Of Billy Apples.

CHAPTER

23

Sold Out!

If ever an entertainer lives for two words, it is these.

Most perform their whole lives and never come within cooee of them.

The very few that do achieve it know that the achievement will be short-lived. As they are walking through one door onto the stage to play to a full house there is always someone waiting in the wings to do exactly the same thing to this very same audience, maybe a year or two, maybe more, maybe less, down the track.

'Swings and roundabouts, that's what showbiz is,' Billy told himself as he gazed around his dressing-room packed with well-wishers, thinking how he had to make the most of tonight because there would come a time when the memory of it would be all he had to convince himself it was real.

The television, radio, press, showbiz crowd, after knocking back The Freckle's champers and

caviar in repayment for all the good words they had said and written and gossiped about Billy, poured out through the open doorway and into the corridor. The Freckle stood midway between both camps, head bouncing from one face to another, as he kept half-a-dozen conversations going at the same time.

Billy had been tempted to ask one of the faces who all the fuss was about. To reassure himself that they were genuine in their praise and not just a bunch of freeloaders who wouldn't say no to a free lunch and endless vino put on by Ricki, who moved from one personality to the other, making each feel that they were the real (and *only*) star here tonight.

For the last hour-and-a-half he had been the absolute centre of their attention, having champers spilt on him, specks of caviar and biscuit sprayed in his face by over-enthusiastic media fans' girlfriends-wives-mistresses. They left no doubt they were here to celebrate Billy Apples, one of their own.

'Dad . . . ' Casey tugged at Billy's sleeve as he was midway through listening to one of the wives' champers-induced blubber over what a national treasure he was and how he was up there with Dame Joan and Slim and John and Kylie and so on.

'Excuse me,' Billy was relieved by Casey's appearance, giving him the release he had been earnestly praying for from the moment the adoring woman had come up and placed her

arm around his waist, pressed her abundant body into his and proceeded to wail his praises. 'Where've you been?' he asked Casey, having expected her hours ago.

'I've been a bit ...' Casey tried not to lie, tied up ...'

'Me too,' Billy glanced around. 'Can't hear myself think. How'm I s'posed to get changed?

'Dad ...?'

'Look, it's okay, all right,' Billy said, gesturing placatingly. 'It's done ... no need to explain anymore, really', he went on, completely misunderstanding that Casey's nervousness was not related to the big—horrendously *gigantic!*—favour she had pressed upon him days earlier.

'I want you to know,' Casey went on, 'that I know how important tonight is for you ... and whatever happens—'

'What could happen?' Billy smiled widely. 'I'm up there with the best big band in the country. Got my own backing vocalists—I've got a pair of duds'd do a millionaire proud, the best sound and light boys in the business and a Sold Out house! You know what's gonna happen?'

'Well, actually, of the two of us, *I do*,' the words were on the tip of her tongue and it was only by biting it that they did not spring out and give the whole game away.

'I'm gonna knock them sideways!' Billy was gleeful.

'Yes, you are, Dad,' Casey said quietly. 'That's exactly what you are going to do—knock

them for a six.' She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek and threw her arms around his neck. 'I love you, Dad, and I am the proudest daughter in the whole damn world.'

Before Billy could hug her back and tell her that he loved her, Casey let go and pushed her way back through the crowd now being directed out of the dressing-room by Ricki and The Freckle so that he could change.

'Love you too,' Billy said to himself, seeing Casey get swallowed up in the corridor troop. 'The whole damn world ...'

'... and now, put your hands together for Mr Exhilaration!—No. 1 in the nation—that superstar sensation ... Billy—Apples!'

The announcer's voice was lost in the thundering applause as the big band hit the brass, the drums belting, bass throbbing, the tempo thrusting and the two spotlights joined as one stage right where Billy stepped from the wings, arms raised like the champion he was, dressed in white tux, black slacks and red bow tie, seizing the moment for all he was worth.

Making his way to the microphone appearing out of the floor at centre stage, he passed the three backing vocalists, aware that, apart from every eye in the audience being upon him, the two most piercing belonged to Louise, the tallest of the three women ooh-ooh-oohing, dressed to kill in a bust-accentuating, full-length dress with

elbow-high gloves. Rita Hayworth, eat your heart out! And wasn't she making the most of it? Swinging her body wildly to the music, eyes like turnaces on an ocean liner, her smile fixed with Tarzan's Grip.

Billy grabbed the mike on the beat and swung straight into the first song, catching a glimpse of Ricki and The Freckle in the wings on one side of the stage, both giving him the thumbs-up. As he turned to sing to the people in the few front rows at the other side of the theatre, he made out another figure in the wings on that side. Casey . . . ? His attention went to the seat right in the front on the centre aisle, the prime seat in the place he had booked for her. It was empty.

What was she doing up here?

As he reached the chorus in the song, where the girls joined in, Billy felt an imbalance in the sound feedback.

Bloody best in the business, Freckle! He glanced towards the wings, frowning, only to realise it wasn't an imbalance at all—it was Louise, pitching herself to steal the higher ground. He threw Louise an admonishing look, warning her silently to back off! Louise chose to ignore him, keeping herself above the two other singers.

'What's that bitch playing at?' Kev craned his head past Ricki to get a look at the vocalists.

Ricki placed a hand to her face. She knew it was bad news to have even contemplated the

idea of Billy's ex becoming part of the show.

'No, please, Mum,' Casey groaned from her place in the wings on the other side of the stage.

The conductor was in a foul state. His baton bouncing along with the beat, he let it all show in his rigid shoulders. He conveyed the anger of someone who was having their toes repeatedly stepped upon.

Billy grabbed the song back in the second verse, swinging it all the way to the stars that swarmed across the enormous high ceiling of the packed theatre. There were two thousand plus faces out there in the dark and he was doing his darnedest to let every single person know he was singing straight to them and them only.

Edging back towards the chorus, Billy shot a warning look across to Louise—back off!—but she chose to be looking elsewhere ... at *her audience*.

On the beat, Louise grabbed the microphone in front of the three women and dominated it, her elbows rising into a horizontal position to block the two from getting to it.

Casey wanted to die! She felt embarrassed and shamed by her mother's deception. And used. It was bad enough that Casey was an accomplice to what was to eventuate here tonight and would have ramifications into the camp on the other side of the stage in the wings, but to have personally been responsible for

allowing this ... this ... horrible upstaging to take place before two-thousand-plus people was unforgivable!

Kev was ready to hurl his empty soft drink can at her.

Ricki wanted to kill!

Louise's outrageous conduct, now swinging one arm joyously heavenward to accentuate the words, threw Billy and he stumbled over the words which in turn threw the brass.

'Get her off the stage!' Kev screamed, pulling at what little hair he had, not caring a fig who heard him out there in the darkened theatre. 'This is hijacking!' he rambled loudly. 'There's no other word for it! Don't they execute hijackers?' This right at Ricki's face. Then to the stage manager: 'Where's a gun? Get me one of those ... those ...' his hands went everywhere trying to explain what he was after, 'yank 'em off the stage things!'

Just when Billy, Casey, The Freckle and Ricki were at boiling point, Louise went for broke, knowing instinctively she had *her* audience—who were really none the wiser as to what was taking place—exactly where she wanted them, in the palm of her hand. With the song coming down the straight, she released the microphone from its stand and stepped brazenly from the vocalists' raised section onto the stage, moving in on Billy. He hunched his shoulders against the invasion, her spiralling voice drowning him out, drowning out The Freckle's (now)

insane tirade of threats, and giving the band a run for their money.

And then her damage was well and truly done. The song had ended. The drummer—as mad as hell and refusing to take it anymore!—thrashed his cymbals for all he was worth, giving the audience, mad for more, back what they were giving everyone on stage.

‘Thank you,’ Billy raised his hands to the applause, Louise hovering at his rear, shrieking, clasping her hands to her breasts, unable to believe the response to *her* performance.

Casey was close to tears. She hated her! Hated her! Hated her! How could she be so unfeeling? How could she do this to Billy? She was going to ruin *everything*!

‘... thank you ...’ Billy tried, hoped, prayed for the applause to finish. Didn’t they realise Louise was an addict and they were feeding her an endless supply of what she craved for almost as much as the air she breathed.

‘You’re a great audience ...’ Billy’s smile was hurting.

‘Aren’t they just, Billy,’ Louise stepped right up to his microphone, one hand going affectionately to his shoulder, the Tarzan’s Grip smile fixed on the centre spot, head tilted just so to the whole theatre.

‘Wonderful ...’ Billy managed, his knees turning to sand.

‘They deserve a round of applause as well, don’t you agree?’

Kev had lockjaw. In all his years on and off the stage he had never—*never!*—witnessed such a show of complete larceny. Ricki's stomach grumbled. Tonight had the makings of a blood-letting ritual to follow in The Freckle's office upon the morn.

Billy didn't move. Didn't make a sound.

'Come on, boys,' Louise gestured to the band, with all the panache of a schoolteacher spurring on the home team, 'let's show these wonderful, wonderful people out there in the dark—these *gorgeous* people—how much we *love* them!'

'The boys', as lost as Scott, Burke, Wills, et al., looked at the conductor for their lead. He in turn looked at Billy who in turn looked at The Freckle and saw only a wide-open mouth and gaping eyes resting on cheeks as red as a polished apple. With no one leading and no one following, Louise took over, applauding loudly into the microphone. The conductor threw his baton aside, shrugged, and started clapping. The band followed suit, the two vocalists—who would gladly, given the merest sign from anyone in charge, have stepped across and slit Louise's throat with their false fingernails and drunk her blood—joining in.

Louise gave a shriek of delight that would have done Marilyn proud, whirled around to the conductor, the band, back to Billy and finally to the vocalists.

'That's what I love about this business,'

Billy managed, 'it's always full of surprises.' He had no choice but to include the ex. 'Thank you, Louise . . . ' She gave another shriek and backed off, returning reluctantly to the two vocalists.

'And now . . . ' Billy tugged at the bow tie—God it was uncomfortable up here tonight!—and forced himself to get the show back onto the rails. 'And now . . . ' He was distracted by a movement in the wings, someone joining Casey. Someone very familiar. Kate . . . ? 'And now . . . ' Where in the hell was he? Yes, Fats Waller. 'We'll pick up the tempo with a Fats Waller classic . . . '

'Oh, no you won't!' Sid cried out from the rear of the theatre.

'Wwwwhhhhhhaattt?' The Freckle was having a stroke. Who organised this show? *Basil Fawlty?*

Billy felt as if he had been hit with a brick—in both the front and back of the head—as the soaring trumpet sound of a familiar tune swirled around the theatre, sending a chill through the collective spine of the audience. This was the kind of magic most concertgoers only read about happening at some other concert, not the one they attended.

Billy had broken out into a thin sweat, trying to ignore Kev having a major breakdown in the wings, Ricki trying to stay clear of his swirling, twirling arms and glancing at the wings on the other side of the stage.

Yes! It was Kate who was standing in the

wings with Casey, the two clasping hands and using their supercharged, tense bodies to send out some kind of heavy-duty message: *DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!*

Do what?—was the clear signal Billy's hapless expression sent back to them.

'Sing!' came the harsh, intense reply.

If the conductor, the band, Louise and the vocalists were as bamboozled as Billy was at this juncture, Rob's appearance, stepping from the wings behind Casey and Kate up to the pianist, merely accelerated the craziness.

'Take a hike, "Liberace",' Rob barked in the pianist's ear, sending him scurrying on his way from the stool off the stage. Rob hit the ivories, coming in on Sid's beat. Billy swung around, recognising Rob's familiar aggro, to be greeted by a Groucho Marx flutter of the eyebrows and a grin that said, *'Gotcha!'*

Topping Rob's appearance—with Sid now standing in the aisle just below Billy—was Jack, doing a Chuck Berry entrance from the wings and playing his bass as if it were a guitar, the cheering of the ecstatic audience almost drowning out the trio.

In quick succession, Mack's drumming rose from inside the raised box to the side of the stage, completing the quartet, with only Billy's contribution still missing to bring the band back home again.

Lowering his trumpet, Sid faced Billy with a look of triumph.

'Triumph over what?' Billy asked himself.
'Come on, mate,' Sid shouted up to him,
'sing!'

'Sing, Dad!'

'Sing, Billy!' Kate urged.

'Sing, Applehead!' this from The Freckle,
through cupped hands. *'Get on with it!'*

There was much Ricki wanted to shout out
as well, but she had gone beyond being able to
communicate verbally. Her teeth were gritted so
tightly, she doubted she would ever part them
again.

As the audience quietened, Rob hit the keys
again, tinkling out the intro to a familiar Gersh-
win song.

Billy opened his mouth and started to
sing—he had no alternative—the Billie Holiday
voice floundering. Rob stopped. Sid frowned up
at Billy, giving him a shake of the head—*Wrong!*

Rob started playing again, from the top,
leaving Billy perplexed. Everyone was prompt-
ing him to sing and that is what he was trying
to do. Okay, he'd try again. About to open his
mouth, Louise got there first, reading the whole
situation as a God-given opportunity to really
take over the show! After all, it was clear Billy
had lost it!

'Oh, Dad! Please sing!' Casey pleaded.

'Billy! Sing—from the heart!' Kate cried out to
him, stepping as close to the edge of the wings
as she could without actually appearing on stage.

From the heart? The heart . . . ?

Billy, drawn to the star-filled ceiling, was transported, feeling his body being lifted away from the stage, up there where it had all begun, on the roof of his house—only, this time, he wasn't terrified, not even scared. He felt himself being turned over and around, like a newborn baby in the womb, ready to face the world and all its mysteries for the first time. And all through the experience, a chorus of voices cried out to him, 'Sing, Billy, sing! From the heart!' As quickly as he had been lifted away, he was back on stage, his audience waiting ... waiting ...

Something was triggered inside of Billy. He stepped up to the microphone and started to sing—in the clear, deep, magical voice Kate had overhead in the churchyard—riding over Louise, who momentarily lost her timing, and the plot, when memories, prompted by this voice, came crashing through the floodgates and almost washed her off stage.

'You're finished, Applehead!' The Freckle screamed a Tarzan-like scream.

With his quartet moving like fresh cream through the melody, Billy paused and cried back to The Freckle from behind his hand, '*Finished? I'm only just getting started!*' and traipsed lightly back into the song, throwing a wave to Kate and Casey, now hugging each other with joy. He'd get to them later.

Left with no alternative, the conductor directed his baton at the confused musicians,

who knew the song by rote, leading them into the performance.

For the first time in his life, Billy knew what it was like to hold people in the palm of his hand, to take them to places they had forgotten they could go—back to the joy to be found inside their hearts—a fact not lost on Ricki as she gazed around the side curtains, listened to Billy and lapped up the magic he was creating.

The Freckle, done with Applehead, was leaving the wings and heading towards the stage door when Ricki grabbed him from behind.

'Get back here, and listen, Kevin!' she barked, finding her voice. '*This is not all bad!*'

'The Wall Street Crash—both of them—they were *bad!*' The Freckle pulled against her, but she had found superwoman strength and struggled to get him back to the wings. '*This is a disaster!*' he fumed.

Coming to the middle eight, Billy did a most unexpected thing. Turning to the vocalists, he held out his hand towards Louise, motioning for her to join him.

'No, don't do it, Dad.' Casey shook her head, her high taking a slump.

'Oh, yes,' Louise said, joining Billy and letting his arms enfold her, 'I knew we could do it all over again!' Their rhythm was as one, as Ginger was to Fred, and Louise felt herself melt at the thought of the whole new career that lay before them. 'Take me to the stars, Billy!'

Louise's heart was melting, whereas Kate felt hers turn brittle. She had obviously made the biggest blunder of her life in forcing Billy to find his heart, because there it was, now dancing in his arms.

From the rear of the theatre, where she had ushered Sid in through the doors, Julie was seething one hundred per cent hatred for Billy. What a jerk Kate had been to think 'she could lead him back home' or 'wake him up', or whatever foolish notion it was she had. And what dummies they had been to go along with her!

A heady swirl of music from the quartet and big band—and Billy released his hold on Louise's waist and gave the hand he was holding a hefty flick, catching her completely by surprise and sending her spinning across the stage towards the wings, The Freckle and Ricki awaiting the inevitable with not a chance of making a break for it!

Casey, Kate and Julie, as one, gave a shriek of absolute surprise and joy at the picture of Louise, an unguided missile in flashing red, disappearing with a scream into the wings. From Casey and Kate's vantage point, they saw her hit The Freckle head on, Ricki taking a strategic side-step just before the moment of impact. Billy winced as he caught a glimpse of the disaster he had caused in the wings.

Ricki stepped around the tangle of arms and legs of Louise and The Freckle and focused on this New and Improved Billy Apples. Her mind

was racing, already thinking of appropriate songs for his next album—whether it was on Hot Records or not mattered not a fig to her. She had discovered Billy the first time and it was she who was rediscovering him now.

'Get off me!' The Freckle yelled, mind flooding with a myriad law suits he would instigate immediately. He tried to find his way out from under Louise, but she held onto his collar and had no intention of letting go. He was facing a madwoman.

'I do a *fabulous* Al Jolson!' Louise yelled at him, but timing being everything in showbiz, this piece of information was of no concern to him. He wanted away!

Finding his feet, The Freckle pulled against her hold, but she held firm.

'It has possibilities!'

The Freckle gave one last yank, his collar tearing loose in Louise's grip, and made The Great Escape, Louise not giving up on him, singing at the top of her voice in pursuit—an Al Jolson minstrel song.

Crashing through the stage door with Louise thrashing around just a few inches behind him, singing about Campdown races and doo-das, The Freckle was oblivious to a piece of show business history erupting in his wake.

Billy's performance, taking the audience by complete surprise, brought about a torrent of applause that went on—and on—and on, people rising to their feet, stomping, whistling, crying

out, 'More! More! More!' until they were hoarse.

Standing in the spotlight, arms around Rob and Jack, with Sid and Mack joining them, Billy felt two lumpy tears rise in his eyes. The band, conductor and vocalists only added to the glory of the moment.

Glancing at Casey, he saw his tears were matched by others running down her cheeks. Expecting a similar reaction from Kate, he was startled to see her move away and exit the wings, into the rear of the theatre.

Very strange. Very strange indeed.

That night, Billy sang until he could sing no more, and only then did the audience let him leave the stage. If I never sing in front of an audience again, he thought, as the curtain finally came down, I am filled with enough applause to last me ten lifetimes.

CHAPTER

24

I have to be one lucky woman ...'
'Woman?'

'You know what I mean. Okay, girl ...'

'Lucky? How come?'

It was well after three in the morning. Casey, with Billy's arm around her shoulders, sat on the roof of their house where Billy had insisted they climb when they finally arrived home after the post-show festivities.

He had not an ounce of fear about heights now. That fear had vanished along with a whole heap of other anxieties in that strange moment on the stage when he had gazed up at the ceiling of stars. He would never breathe a word to a soul, but in those stars he had seen Billie Holiday—in a kind of 'connect-the-stars' form—and she had given him the nod ... it was okay to let go, to just be who he was. That was her gift, he realised, not directly, but bit-by-bit over the years, through the legacy of her music. All the pain she had gone through to be Lady Day

was in every song he had ever sung of hers, in every tune he had played on his trombone. She was in him, whether he liked it or not—and *he did, of course he did*—only, his own identity had to come through in the end.

'How come,' Casey repeated, 'I take after you—not Mum?'

'And you reckon that's gotta be good?'

'The things she did to us!' Casey gave a firm nod of the head. 'She's not a nice woman, Dad.'

'She was, a long time ago,' Billy said softly. 'I loved her once ... one day, who knows ... people change ... '

They fell silent, the distance hum of a city sleeping but never fully asleep filling the clear night.

'You're not mad at us, are you?'

Billy thought about it.

'Mad? For hijacking my big show? Sticking me with the boys 'til Doomsday? Opening my eyes at last?' He paused, then added, 'Nah.'

Casey felt wonderful—almost. There was still one last detail—pretty major, too—to sort out.

'Big day tomorrow ... ?'

'The biggest,' Billy agreed, knowing exactly what she was getting at.

Casey sighed, feeling very tired. 'It's been quite a holiday, Dad.' She let a yawn break.

'It's only just beginning ... ' Billy said.

'OOOooooo—Why, Yeeeeessss ... ' Ita's response to her latest hairstyle, exposed in the mirror of the New Moon, escaped with the sound of a cat's tail going under a moving car. Her prune lips, not so dried these days since Perc had returned to the fold, mused over the creation lifted straight from the pages of the latest *Woman's Day* ... a photograph of a particular *Baywatch* babe Perc had taken a shine to.

Kate was feeling about as low as a snake with a tummy rash having to crawl across gravel. All her big plans, her great ideas (crazy, nuts, troppo, etc.) had come to nothing—oh, with the exception of Billy, the boys and even Julie, now on top of the world with Sid, a reconstructed jazz muso and the bad old days of Lost Property and driving buses firmly behind him.

Find his heart! Terrific! And lose my own into the bargain! Top deal!

Julie, busy between two customers, kept her thoughts to herself. She didn't want to, but what choice did she have. She felt bad for Kate, the one loser in a night of winners, but what could she do to make things right without sticking her nose in where it might do damage to the way things had turned out?

Why hadn't Billy shown his face? He could have at least picked up the phone and called! Hey—what's wrong with a courier pigeon?

Each of the women in the salon was occupied with her own problems and dilemmas—from matters of the hair to those of the heart—

and took no notice of the customer stepping into the shop carrying a single rose, holding a full bunch behind his back ... not until he started singing.

Kate, combing strands of Ita's hair, froze, listened, not daring to turn around, afraid she, and only she, could hear this beautiful voice in her head, because she wanted it more than anything.

Glancing into the mirror, Kate saw that Ita was not looking at herself the way she always did when having her hair styled; she was looking past Kate's reflection, to ... Billy!

Fearing her emotions, Kate turned slowly to Billy moving towards her, offering her a single rose, singing straight into her eyes.

Julie had no idea she was showering one of the customers with water at the sink—and the woman being showered didn't care that water was dripping from her soaked hair down her face.

His rich crooning filling the salon, Billy brought the bunch of roses from behind his back, and presented them to Kate, not taking his eyes from her. She had trouble taking the flowers, feeling herself being lifted joyfully off the ground by his love.

Sid's familiar trumpet arose from behind Julie. He stepped from the rear of the salon, from behind the divider. Before Julie could fully react, the shop was suddenly alive with activity—Casey, her pals, Kristin, Melody and Alex,

followed by Anna and O'Hara, filed into the place, each carrying an abundance of red roses!

Kate's head was swimming—roses, roses and more roses! An endless stream, bunches upon bunches taking up every bit of room, the other women squealing, laughing in delight. It was crazy—surreal!—everything she had ever wished for and nothing like she could ever have imagined—yet so . . . Billy Apples!

Kate was taken into Billy's arms, where she knew she would spend the rest of her life—*their lives!*—Casey, her pals, Anna and O'Hara returning over and over to the salon, filling it with roses.

'You wanted roses,' Billy whispered in Kate's ear, 'roses is what you've got . . .'

'And . . . ?' she prompted him gently.

'Oh, yes . . . I love you . . .'

Tim Winton

The Riders

Fred Scully can't wait to see his wife and daughter.
He's got a new life for them all worked out.

He's sweated on this reunion.

The doors at the airport hiss open.

Scully's life falls apart . . .

'*The Riders* is a tremendous read. It is fierce about life.
Tim Winton wants to sweep you off your feet; let him'
THE SPECTATOR

' . . . he is not a great Australian novelist: he is a great
novelist, full stop'
THE TIMES

'A haunting, sprawling, gut-wrenching tale from a
prodigiously talented young novelist'
ESQUIRE

' . . . a hell of a novel . . . a hell of an important novel'
AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

Robert G. Barrett

The Day of the Gecko

LES NORTON IS BACK IN TOWN!

When Les moves into his old flame Side Valve Susie's flat in Bondi for a few days while she's away, everything *should* be a piece of cake — except Price and Eddie have other ideas. Waverley Council are planning to demolish Bondi baths, but there are two bodies buried under the handball court there. The man to get them out? Major Garrick Lewis, aka, The Gecko.

With Norton for company, The Gecko literally takes Bondi in his stride; and everything that goes with it — Mossad hit squads, the KGB, ASIO, yobbo builders looking for trouble, loose women looking for action. For once, Les is flat out keeping up.

From Gulf War technology to just a good cup of coffee, Robert G. Barrett's latest Les Norton adventure confirms why he is Australia's most popular writer.

Paul Mann

The Ganja Coast

Goa's 'ganja coast' is India's last refuge of uninhibited pleasure.

When the strangled body of a child is found floating in the waves, lawyer George Sansi finds himself embroiled in a tangled jungle of corruption that appears to stem from the highest levels of power.

The Ganja Coast is a gripping journey into a land where ancient nobility and modern depravity live side by side.

' . . . astoundingly vivid scenes of a decadent city in the throes of life . . . '

NEW YORK TIMES

'*The Ganja Coast* details what travelogues would never dare and what earlier chroniclers — E.M. Forster, say, or Rudyard Kipling — never knew'

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Anthony Hyde

Formosa Straits

From the bestselling author of *China Lake* and *The Red Fox* comes a fascinating voyage into a mysterious culture and a novel that is an all-stops-out thrill of a ride.

When Nick Lamp pays a visit to Taiwan's underworld boss, what he finds is a dead body. Suddenly he is in the midst of a police investigation — as the main suspect. His search for proof of his innocence takes him from modern-day Taiwan and Hong Kong all the way back to pre-war Shanghai.

Anthony Hyde is at the top of his game and his game is suspense. This is a triumphant, international thriller.

John Gunn

Water Hazard

THERE'S A KILLER OUT THERE ON THE 13TH HOLE
AND IT'S NOT THE GREAT WHITE SHARK.

*'... Face down it was. Bouncing a bit with the waves
breaking.'*

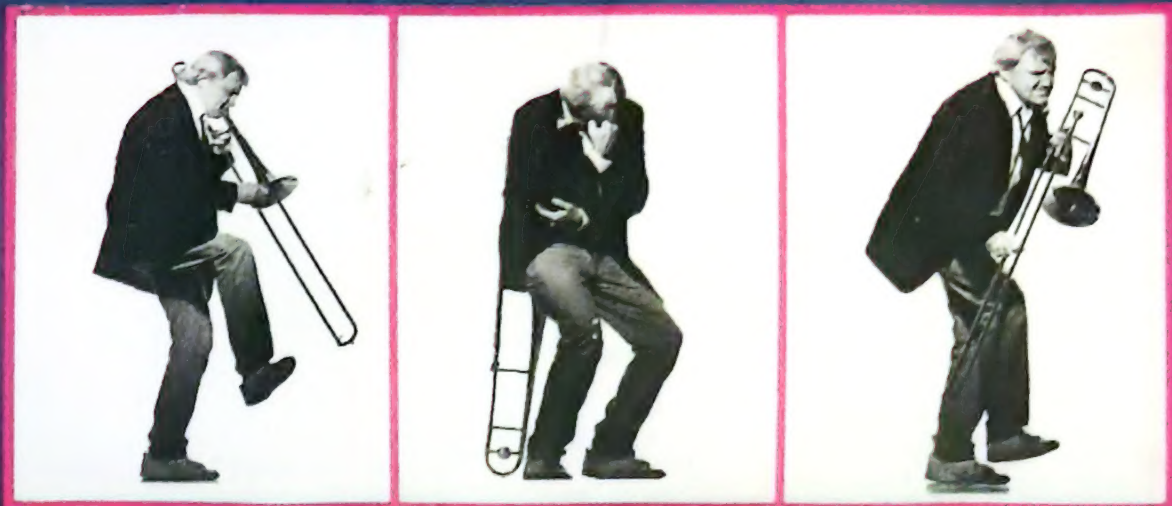
'Did you recognise him?'

*'Half of Sydney would've recognised him. Craig Myers.
Very much dead.'*

Playing private detective is no bed of roses for Henry
Lawson. Particularly when you're just an author and the
victim is only the most famous TV personality in the
country . . .

And these days, what with being tailed by foreign cars,
shot at, broken into, having to rescue his own wife, not
to mention nearly being drowned, Henry's a little tired.
And all he wants is a quiet round of golf.

Billy, be somebody!



Billy Appleby *knew* that he would be somebody – the problem was who and how? When you're a struggling single parent and owner of a tiny Newtown hardware store, fame seems a million miles away.

But when he wakes up one morning and finds that he can sing like his idol, the legendary Billie Holiday, Billy's life takes an amazing new turn. Suddenly, the fame that has eluded him is on his doorstep. But does fame always bring happiness? Billy's about to find out . . .

Billy's Holiday

STARRING Max Cullen Kris McQuade Tina Bursill Drew Forsythe
Genevieve Lemon Richard Roxburgh Rachael Coopes

WRITTEN BY Denis Whitburn **PRODUCED BY** Tim Miller

DIRECTED BY

Soundtrack



Pan Macmillan Australia

Cover photographs: Philip Le Mas
Cover design: Liz Seymour

FICTION

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